PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

The WISHING WELL

by MILDRED A. WIRT

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

By Mildred A. Wirt

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THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
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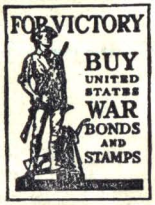

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The WISHING WELL

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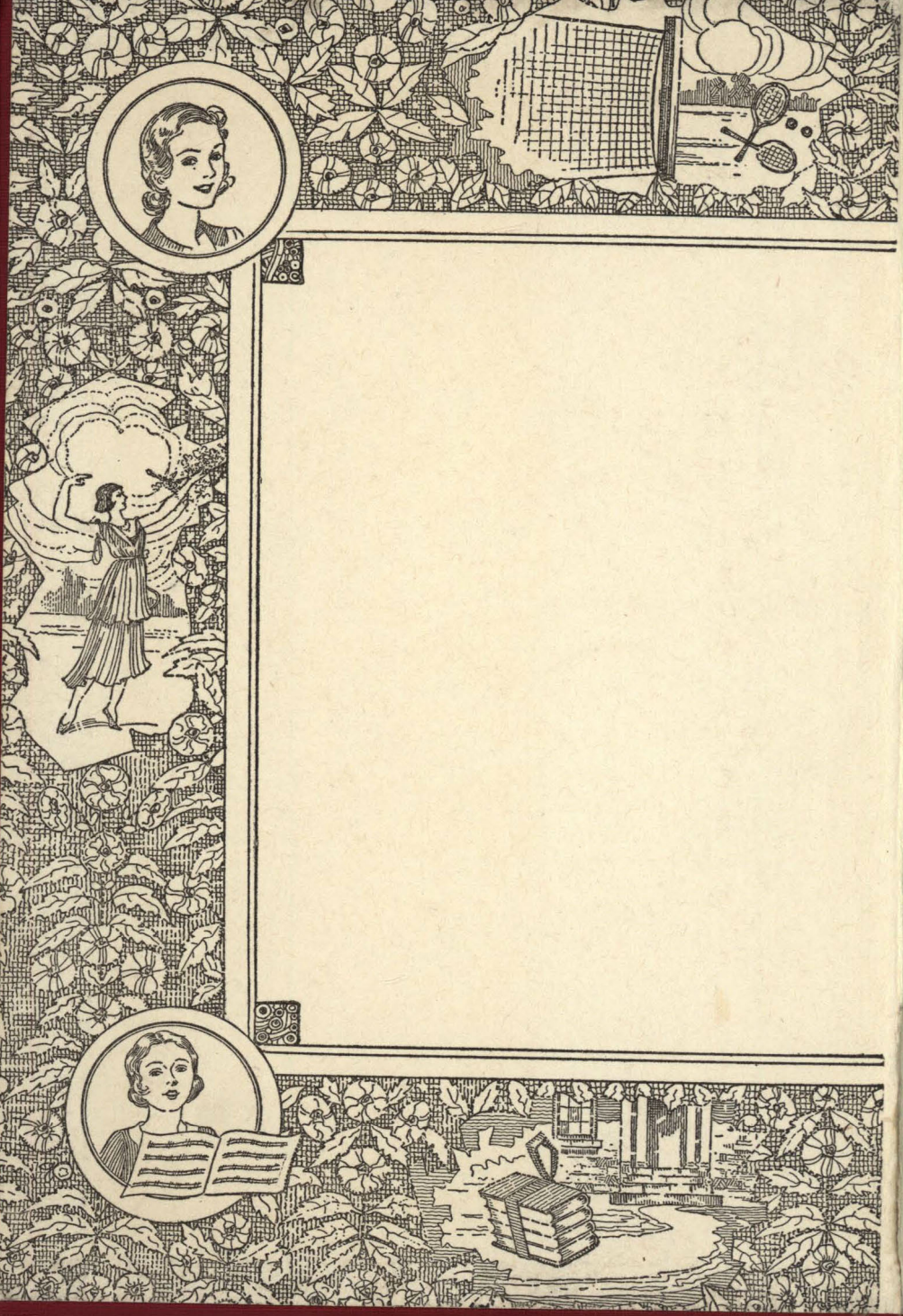

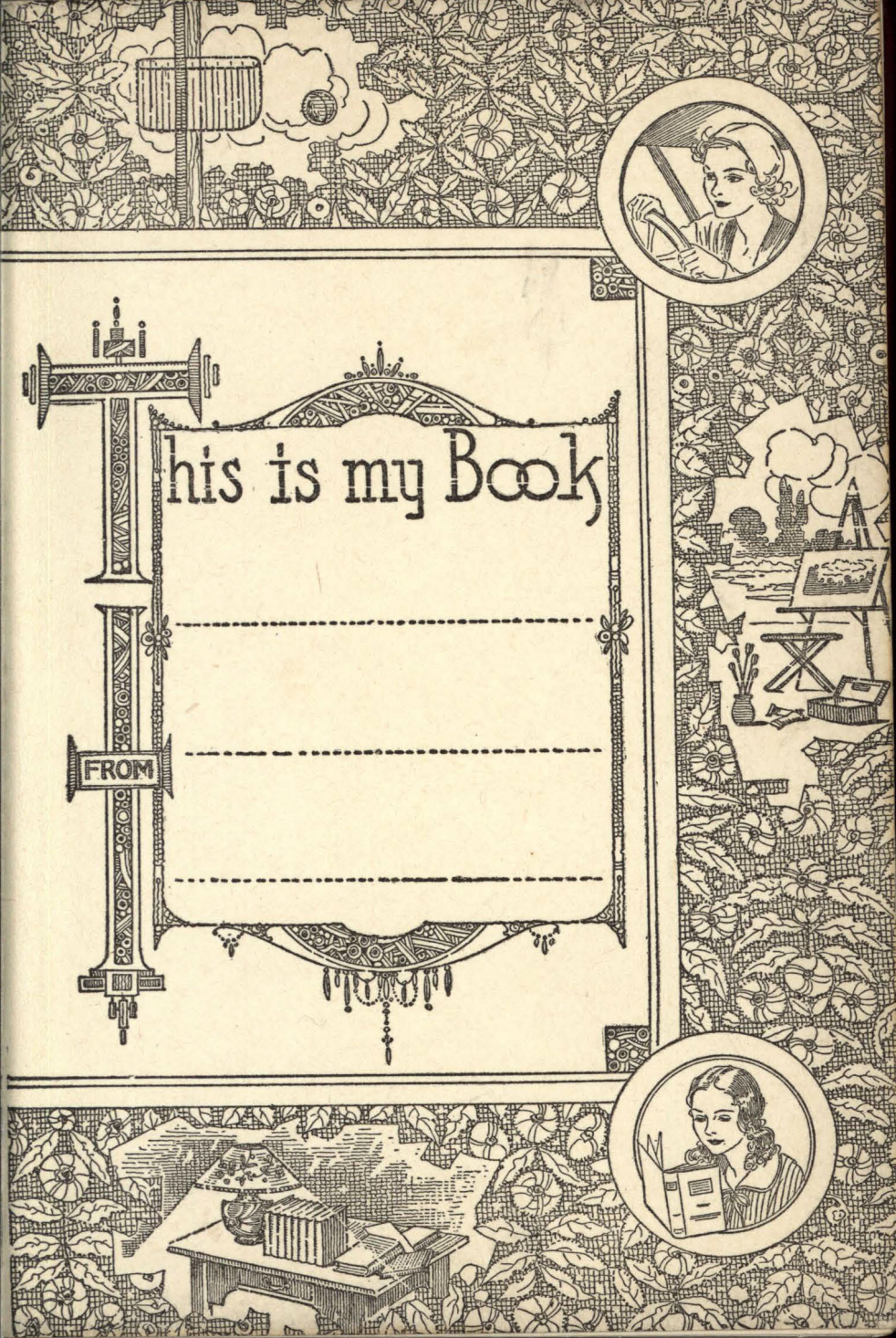
This is my Book
FROM

HE WHEELED AND RAN OUT THE OPEN DOOR.

"The Wishing Well" (See Page 199)

The Wishing Well

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY

Publishers

NEW YORK

PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

Large 12 mo. *Cloth* *Illustrated*

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THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL

Other Titles in Preparation

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The Wishing Well

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CHAPTER

1

AN OLD HOUSE

AT HER desk in the assembly room of Riverview High School, Penny Parker sat poised for instant flight. Her books had been stacked away, and she awaited only the closing bell to liberate her from a day of study.

"Now don't forget!" she whispered to her chum, Louise Sidell, who occupied the desk directly behind. "We start for the old Marborough place right away!"

The dismissal bell tapped. Penny bolted down the aisle and was one of the first to reach the door. However, hearing her name called, she was forced to pause.

"Penelope, will you wait a moment please?" requested the teacher in charge of assembly.

"Yes, Miss Nelson," Penny dutifully responded, but she shot her chum a glance of black despair.

"What have you done now?" Louise demanded in an accusing whisper.

"Not a thing," muttered Penny. "About ten minutes ago I clipped Fred Green with a paper ball, but I don't think she saw me."

"Get out of it as fast as you can," Louise urged. "Unless we start for the Marborough place within half an hour we'll have to postpone the trip."

While the other pupils filed slowly from the room, Penny slumped back into her seat. She was a tall, slim girl with mischievous blue eyes which hinted of an active mind. Golden hair was accented by a brown sweater caught at the throat with a conspicuous ornament, a weird looking animal made of leather.

"Penelope, I don't suppose you know why I asked you to remain," observed the teacher, slowly coming down the aisle.

"Why, no, Miss Nelson." Penny was far too wise to make damaging admissions.

"I want to talk to you about Rhoda Wiegand."

"About Rhoda?" Penny echoed, genuinely surprised. The girl was a new student at Riverview, somewhat older than the members of her class, and lived in a trailer camp at the outskirts of the city.

Miss Nelson seated herself at a desk opposite Penny, thus indicating that she meant the talk to be friendly and informal.

"Penelope," she resumed, "you are president of the Palette Club. Why has Rhoda never been taken in as a member? She is one of our most talented art students."

"Some of the girls don't seem to like Rhoda very well," Penny answered, squirming uncomfortably. "We did talk about taking her into the club, but nothing came of it."

"As president of the organization, couldn't you arrange it?"

"I suppose so," Penny admitted, frowning thoughtfully.

"Why do the girls dislike Rhoda?"

"There doesn't seem to be any special reason for it."

"Her poverty, perhaps?"

"I don't think it's that," Penny defended the club members. "Rhoda is so quiet that the girls have never become acquainted with her."

"Then I suggest that they make an immediate effort," Miss Nelson ended the interview. "The Palette Club has no right to an existence unless it welcomes members with real art talent."

A group of girls awaited Penny when she reached the locker room. They eagerly plied her with questions as to why she had been detained by the teacher.

"I'll tell you later," Penny promised.

At the other side of the room Rhoda Wiegand was removing a coat from her locker. A sober-faced girl of seventeen, she wore a faded blue dress which seemed to draw all color from her thin face. Knowing that she was not well liked, she seldom spoke or forced herself upon the other students.

"Rhoda," began Penny, paying no heed to the

amazed glances of her friends, "the Palette Club is having a meeting this afternoon at the old Marborough place. Why not come with us?"

The older girl turned quickly, a smile of surprise and pleasure brightening her face.

"Oh, I should love to go, only I don't think—" Hesitating, she gazed at the other girls who were eyeing her in a none too friendly way.

Penny gave Louise Sidell a little pinch. Her chum, understanding what was expected, said with as much warmth as she could: "Yes, do come, Rhoda. We plan to sketch the old wishing well."

"I have enough drawing material for both of us," Penny added persuasively.

"If you really want me, of course I'll come!" Rhoda accepted, her voice rather tremulous. "I've heard about the Marborough homestead, and always longed to see it."

A group of subdued girls gathered their belongings from the lockers, preparing to leave the school grounds. No one understood why Penny had invited Rhoda to attend the outing, and the act had not been a popular one.

Boarding a bus, the twelve members of the Palette Club soon reached the end of the line, and from there walked a quarter of a mile into the country. Penny and Louise chose Rhoda as their companion, trying to make her feel at ease. Conversation became rather

difficult and they were relieved when, at length, they approached their destination.

"There's the old house," Penny said, indicating a steep pitched roof-top which could be seen rising above a jungle of tall oaks. "It's been unoccupied for at least ten years now."

The Marborough homestead, a handsome dwelling of pre-Civil war day, long had been Riverview's most outstanding architectural curiosity. Only in a vague way was Penny familiar with its history. The property had been named Rose Acres and its mistress, Mrs. James Marborough, had moved from the city many years before, allowing the house to stand unpainted and untended. Once so beautifully kept, the grounds had become a tangle of weeds and untrimmed bushes. Even so, the old plantation home with its six graceful pillars, retained dignity and beauty.

Entering the yard through a space where a gate once had stood, the girls gazed about with interest. Framed in a clump of giant azaleas was the statue of an Indian girl with stone feathers in her hair. Beyond, they caught a glimpse of the river which curved around the south side of the grounds in a wide bend.

"Where is the old wishing well?" Rhoda inquired. "I've heard so much about it."

"We're coming to it now," Penny replied, leading the way down an avenue of oak trees.

Not far from the house stood the old-fashioned cov-

ered well. Its base was of cut stone and on a bronze plate had been engraved the words: "*If you do a good deed, you can make a wish and it will come true.*"

"Some people around Riverview really believe that this old well has the power to make wishes come true," Louise Sidell remarked, peering at her reflection mirrored in the water far below. "In the past years when Mrs. Marborough lived here, it had quite a reputation."

"The water is still good if you don't mind a few germs," Penny added with a laugh. "I see that someone has replaced the bucket. There was none here the last time I came."

By means of the long sweep, she lowered the receptacle and brought it up filled with water.

"Make a wish, Penny," one of her friends urged. "Maybe it will come true."

"Everyone knows what she'll ask for!" teased Louise. "Her desires are always the same—a bigger weekly allowance!"

Penny smiled as she drew a dipper of water from the wooden bucket.

"How about the good deed?" she inquired lightly. "I've done nothing worthy of a demand upon this old well."

"You helped your father round up a group of Night Riders," Louise reminded her. "Remember the big story you wrote for the *Riverview Star* which was titled: *The Clock Strikes Thirteen?*"

"I did prevent Clyde Blake from tricking a number

of people in this community," Penny acknowledged. "Perhaps that entitles me to a wish."

Drinking deeply from the dipper, she poured the last drops into the well, watching as they made concentric circles in the still water below.

"Old well, do your stuff and grant my wish," she entreated. "Please get busy right away."

"But what is your wish, Penny?" demanded one of the girls. "You have to tell."

"All right, I wish that this old Marborough property could be restored to its former beauty."

"You believe in making hard ones," Louise laughed. "I doubt that this place ever will be fixed up again—at least not until after the property changes hands."

"It's Rhoda's turn now," Penny said, offering the dipper to her.

The older girl stepped to the edge of the well, her face very serious.

"Do you think wishes really do come true?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Oh, it's only for the fun of it," Louise responded. "But they do say that in the old days, this well had remarkable powers. At least many persons came here to make wishes which they claimed came true. I couldn't believe in it myself."

Rhoda stood for a moment gazing down into the well. Drinking from the dipper, she allowed a few drops to spatter into the deep cavern below.

"I wish—" she said in a low, tense voice—"I wish

that some day Pop and Mrs. Breen will be repaid for looking after my brother and me. I wish that they may have more money for food and clothes and a few really nice things."

An awkward, embarrassing silence descended upon the group of girls. Everyone knew that Rhoda and her younger brother, Ted, lived at a trailer camp with a family unrelated to them, but not even Penny had troubled to learn additional details. From Rhoda's wish it was apparent to all that the Breens were in dire poverty.

"It's your turn now, Louise," Penny said quickly.

Louise accepted the dipper. Without drinking, she tossed all the water into the well, saying gaily:

"I wish Penny would grow long ears and a tail! It would serve her right for solving so many mystery cases!"

The other girls made equally frivolous wishes. Thereafter, they abandoned fun for serious work, getting out their sketching materials. Penny and Louise began to draw the old well, but Rhoda, intrigued by the classical beauty of the house, decided to try to transfer it to paper.

"You do nice work," Penny praised, gazing over the older girl's shoulder. "The rest of us can't begin to match it."

"You may have the sketch when I finish," Rhoda offered.

As she spoke, the girls were startled to hear a com-

motion in the bushes behind the house. Chickens began to cackle, and to their ears came the sound of pounding feet.

Suddenly, from the direction of the river, a young man darted into view, pursued by an elderly man who was less agile. To the girls, it was immediately apparent why the youth was being chased, for he carried a fat hen beneath his arm, and ran with hat pulled low over his face.

"A chicken thief!" Penny exclaimed, springing to her feet. "Come on, girls, let's head him off!"

CHAPTER

2

BY THE COVERED WELL

SEEING THE group of girls by the wishing well, the youth swerved, and fled in the opposite direction. Darting into the woods, he ran so swiftly that Penny realized pursuit would be futile.

"Who was he?" she questioned the others. "Did any of you recognize him?"

"I'm sure I've seen him somewhere," Louise Sidell declared. "Were you able to see his face, Rhoda?"

The older girl did not answer, for at that moment the man who had pursued the boy ran into the yard. Breathing hard, he paused near the well.

"Did you see a boy come through here?" he asked abruptly. "The rascal stole one of my good layin' hens."

"We saw him," Penny answered, "but I'm sure you'll never overtake him now. He ran into the woods."

"Reckon you're right," the man muttered, seating himself on the stone rim of the wishing well. "I'm tuckered." Taking out a red-bandana handkerchief, he wiped perspiration from his forehead.

Penny thought that she recognized the man as a stonecutter who lived in a shack at the river's edge. He was a short, muscular individual, strong despite his age, with hands roughened by hard labor. His face had been browned by wind and sun; gray eyes squinted as if ever viewing the world with suspicion and hate.

"Aren't you Truman Crocker?" Penny inquired curiously.

"That's my tag," the stonecutter answered, drawing himself a drink of water from the well. "What are you young 'uns doing here?"

"Oh, our club came to sketch," Penny returned. "You live close by, don't you?"

"Down yonder," the man replied, draining the dipper in a thirsty gulp. "I been haulin' stone all day. It's a hard way to make a living, let me tell you. Then I come home to find that young rascal making off with my chickens!"

"Do you know who he was?" asked Louise.

"No, but this ain't the first time he's paid me a visit. Last week he stole one of my best Rhode Island Reds. I'm plumb disgusted."

Rhoda abruptly arose from the grass, gathering together her sketching materials. As if to put an end to the conversation, she remarked:

"It will soon be dark, girls. I think I should start home."

"We'll all be leaving in a few minutes," Penny replied. "Let's look around a bit more though, before we go."

"You won't see nothin' worth lookin' at around here," the stonecutter said contemptuously. "This old house ain't much any more. There's good lumber in it though, and the foundation has some first class stone."

"You speak as if you had designs on it," Penny laughed. "It would be a shame to tear down a beautiful old house such as this."

"What's it good for?" the man shrugged. "There ain't no one lived here in ten or twelve years. Not since the old lady went off."

"Did you know Mrs. Marborough?"

"Oh, we said howdy to each other when we'd meet, but that was the size of it. The old lady didn't like me none and I thought the same of her. She never wanted my chickens runnin' over her yard. Ain't it a pity she can't see 'em now?"

With a throaty sound, half chuckle, half sneer, the man arose and walked with the girls around the house.

"If you want to look inside, there's a shutter off on the east livin' room window," he informed. "Everything's just like the old lady left it."

"You don't mean the furniture is still in the house!" Rhoda exclaimed incredulously.

"There ain't nothing been changed. I never could figure why someone didn't come in an' haul off her stuff, but it's stood all these years."

Their curiosity aroused, the girls hastened to the window that Truman Crocker had mentioned. Flattening her face against the dirty pane, Penny peered inside.

"He's right!" she announced. "The furniture is still covered by sheets! Why, that's funny."

"What is?" inquired Louise impatiently.

"There's a lady's hat lying on the table!"

"It must be quite out of style by this time," Louise laughed.

"A *new* hat," Penny said with emphasis. "And a purse lying beside it!"

At the other side of the house, an outside door squeaked. Turning around, the group of girls stared almost as if they were gazing at a ghost. An old lady in a long blue silk dress with lace collar and cuffs, stepped out onto the veranda. She gazed beyond the girls toward Truman Crocker who leaned against a tree. Seeing the woman, he straightened to alert attention.

"If it ain't Priscilla Marborough!" he exclaimed. "You've come back!"

"I certainly have returned," the old lady retorted with no friendliness in her voice. "High time someone looked after this place! While I've been away, you seemingly have used my garden as a chicken run!"

"How did I know you was ever coming back?" Crocker demanded. "Anyhow, the place has gone to wrack and ruin. A few chickens more nor less shouldn't make no difference."

"Perhaps not to you, Truman Crocker," Mrs. Marborough returned with biting emphasis. "You know I am home now, so I warn you—keep your live stock out of my garden!"

Penny and her friends shared the old stonecutter's chagrin, for they too were trespassers. Waiting until the woman had finished lecturing Crocker, they offered an apology for the intrusion.

"We're very sorry," Penny said, speaking for the others. "Of course we never dreamed that the house was occupied or we wouldn't have peeped through the window. We came because we wanted to sketch the old wishing well and your lovely home."

Mrs. Marborough came down the steps toward the girls.

"I quite understand," she said in a far milder tone than she had used in speaking to the stonecutter. "You may look around as much as you wish. But first, tell me your names."

One by one they gave them, answering other questions which the old lady asked. She kept them so busy that they had no opportunity to interpose any of their own. But at length Penny managed to inquire:

"Mrs. Marborough, are you planning to open up

your home again? Everyone would be so happy if only you should decide to live here!"

"Happy?" the old lady repeated, her eyes twinkling. "Well, maybe some people would be, and others wouldn't."

"Rose Acres could be made into one of the nicest places in Riverview," declared Louise.

"That would take considerable money," replied Mrs. Marborough. "I've not made any plans yet." Abruptly she turned to face Truman Crocker who was staring at her. "Must you stand there gawking?" she asked with asperity. "Get along to your own land, and mind, don't come here again. I'll not have trespassers."

"You ain't changed a bit, Mrs. Marborough, not a particle," the stonecutter muttered as he slowly moved off.

Truman Crocker's dismissal had been so curt that Penny and her friends likewise started to leave the grounds.

"You needn't go unless you want to," Mrs. Marborough said, her tone softening again. "I never could endure that no-good loafer, Truman Crocker! All the stepping stones are gone from my garden, and I have an idea what became of them!"

The group of girls hesitated, scarcely knowing what to do or say. As the silence became noticeable, Penny tried to make conversation by remarking that she and

her friends had been especially interested in the old wishing well.

"Is it true that wishes made there have come true?" Rhoda Wiegand interposed eagerly.

"Yes and no," the old lady smiled. "Hundreds of wishes have been made at the well over the years. A surprising number of the worthwhile ones have been granted, so folks say. Tell me, did you say your name is Rhoda?"

"Why, yes," the girl responded, surprised that the old lady had remembered. "Rhoda Wiegand."

"Wiegand—odd, I don't recall the name. Have your parents lived many years in Riverview?"

"My mother and father are dead, Mrs. Marborough. My brother and I haven't any living relatives. Mr. and Mrs. Breen took us in so we wouldn't have to go to an orphans' home. They have three children of their own, and I'm afraid we're quite a burden."

"Where do the Breens live, my child?"

"We have a trailer at the Dorset Tourist Camp."

"I've always thought I should enjoy living that way," Mrs. Marborough declared. "Big houses are entirely too much work. If I decide to clean up this place, it will take me weeks."

"Can't we all help you?" suggested Louise impulsively. More than anything else she longed to see the interior of the quaint old house.

"Thank you, my dear, but I shall require no assist-

ance," Mrs. Marborough replied somewhat stiffly. Obviously dismissing the girls, she added: "Do come again whenever you like."

During the bus ride to Riverview, the members of the Palette exchanged comments, speculating upon why the old lady had returned to the city after such a lengthy absence. One by one they alighted at various street corners until only Rhoda, Penny, and Louise remained.

"Rhoda, you'll have a long ride to the opposite side of the city," Penny remarked as she and Louise prepared to leave the bus. "Why not get off here and let me drive you home in my car? It won't take long to get it from the garage."

"Oh, that would be too much trouble," Rhoda protested.

"I want to do it," Penny insisted. Taking the girl by the elbow, she steered her to the bus exit. To Louise she added: "Why not come along with us?"

"Perhaps I will, if you'll drive your good car—not Leaping Lena."

Penny was the proud possessor of two automobiles, one a handsome maroon sedan, the other a dilapidated, ancient "flivver" which had an unpleasant habit of running only when fancy dictated. How she had obtained two cars was a story in itself—in fact, several of them. The maroon model, however, had been the gift of Penny's devoted father, Anthony Parker, publisher

of Riverview's leading daily newspaper, *The Star*. He had presented the car to her in gratitude because she had achieved an exclusive story for his paper, gaining astounding evidence by probing behind a certain mysterious *Green Door*.

Delighted with the gift, Penny promptly sold Leaping Lena only to become so lonesome for her old friend that she had bought it back from a second-hand dealer. In towing the car home she was involved in an accident, and there followed a chain of amazing events which ultimately brought the solution of a mystery case known as *Clue of the Silken Ladder*. Leaping Lena and trouble always went together, according to Louise, but Penny felt that every one of her adventures had been worth while.

"I don't mind taking the maroon car," she replied to her chum. "In fact, Lena hasn't been running so well lately. I think she has pneumonia of the carburetor."

"Or maybe it's just old age sneaking up on her!" Louise added with a teasing laugh.

Reaching the Parker home, Penny ran inside to tell Mrs. Weems, the housekeeper, that she was taking Rhoda to the trailer camp. Returning a moment later, she backed the maroon car from the garage with dazzling skill and further exhibited her prowess as a driver.

"Penny always handles an automobile as if she were enroute to a three-alarm fire!" Louise assured Rhoda. "A reporter at the *Star* taught her how to drive."

Presently, the car arrived at the Dorset Tourist Camp, rolling through an archway entrance into a tree-shaded area.

"Our trailer is parked over at the north side," Rhoda said, pointing to a vehicle with faded brown paint.

Penny stopped the car beneath a large maple tree. Immediately three small children who had been playing close by, rushed up to greet Rhoda. Their hands and faces were very dirty, frocks unpressed and torn, and their hair appeared never to have made contact with comb or brush.

"Are these the Breen youngsters?" inquired Louise.

"Yes," Rhoda answered, offering no apology for the way the children looked. "This is Betty, who is seven. Bobby is five, and Jean is our baby."

Penny and Louise had no intention of remaining at the camp, but before they could drive away, Mrs. Breen stepped from the trailer. She came at once to the car, and Rhoda introduced her.

"I've always told Rhoda to bring her friends out here, but she never would do it," the woman declared heartily. "Come inside and see our trailer."

"We really should be going," Penny demurred. "I told our housekeeper I'd be right back."

"It will only take a minute," Mrs. Breen urged. "I want you to meet my husband—and there's Ted."

The woman had caught a glimpse of a tall young man as he moved hastily around the back side of the trailer.

"Oh, Ted!" she called shrilly. "Come here and meet Rhoda's friends!"

"Don't bother about it, Mrs. Breen," Rhoda said in embarrassment. "Please."

"Nonsense!" the woman replied, and called again. "Ted! Come here, I say!"

With obvious reluctance, the young man approached the automobile. He was tall and slim with many of Rhoda's facial features. Penny felt certain that she had seen him before, yet for a minute she could not think where.

"How are you?" the young man responded briefly as he was presented to the two girls.

"Ted found a little work to do today," Mrs. Breen resumed proudly. "Just a few minutes ago he brought home a nice plump chicken. We're having it for dinner!"

Ted gazed over the woman's head, straight at his sister. Seeing the look which passed between them, Penny suddenly knew where she had seen the young man. Mrs. Breen's remark had given her the required clue. Unquestionably, Ted Wiegand was the one who had stolen the chicken from the old stonecutter!

CHAPTER

3

CHICKEN DINNER

THE DISCOVERY that Rhoda's brother had stolen food was disconcerting to Penny. Saying good-bye to Mrs. Breen, she prepared to drive away from the trailer camp.

"Oh, you can't go so soon," the woman protested. "You must stay for dinner. We're having chicken and there's plenty for everybody!"

"Really we can't remain," Penny declined. "Louise and I both are expected at home."

"You're just afraid you'll put me to a little trouble," Mrs. Breen laughed, swinging open the car door and tugging at Penny's hand. "You have to stay."

Taking a cue from their mother, the three young children surrounded the girls, fairly forcing them toward the trailer. Ted immediately started in the opposite direction.

"You come back here, Ted Wiegand!" Mrs. Breen called in a loud voice.

"I don't want any dinner, Mom."

"I know better," Mrs. Breen contradicted cheerfully. "You're just bashful because we're having two pretty girls visit us. You stay and eat your victuals like you always do, or I'll box your ears."

"Okay," Ted agreed, glancing at Rhoda again. "It's no use arguing with you, Mom."

Neither Penny nor Louise wished to remain for dinner, yet they knew of no way to avoid it without offending Mrs. Breen. Briskly the woman herded them inside the trailer.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she asked proudly. "We have a little refrigerator and a good stove and a sink. We're a bit crowded, but that only makes it more jolly."

A man in shirt sleeves lay on one of the day beds, reading a newspaper.

"Meet my husband," Mrs. Breen said as an afterthought. "Get up, Pop!" she ordered. "Don't you have any manners?"

The man amiably swung his feet to the floor, grinning at Penny and Louise.

"I ain't been very well lately," he said, as if feeling that the situation required an explanation. "The Doc tells me to take it easy."

"That was twenty years ago," Mrs. Breen contributed, an edge to her voice. "Pop's been resting ever since. But we get along."

Rhoda and Ted, who had followed the others into the trailer, were acutely embarrassed by the remark. Penny hastily changed the subject to a less personal one by pretending to show an interest in a book which lay on the table.

"Oh, that belongs to Rhoda," Mrs. Breen responded carelessly. "She brought it from the library. Ted and Rhoda always have their noses in a book. They're my adopted children, you know."

"Mr. and Mrs. Breen have been very kind to us," Rhoda said quietly.

"Stuff and nonsense!" Mrs. Breen retorted. "You've more than earned your keep. Well, if you'll excuse me now, I'll dish up dinner."

Penny and Louise wondered how so many persons could be fed in such a small space, especially as the dinette table accommodated only six. Mrs. Breen solved the problem by giving each of the three small children a plate of food and sending them outdoors.

"Now we can eat in peace," she remarked, squeezing her ample body beneath the edge of the low, anchored table. "It's a little crowded, but we can all get in here."

"I'll take my plate outside," Ted offered.

"No, you stay right here," Mrs. Breen reproved. "I never did see such a bashful boy! Isn't he the limit?"

Having arranged everything to her satisfaction, she began to dish up generous helpings of chicken and potato. The food had an appetizing odor and looked

well cooked, but save for a pot of tea, there was nothing else.

"We're having quite a banquet tonight," Pop Breen remarked appreciatively. "I'll take a drumstick, Ma, if there ain't no one else wantin' it."

"You'll take what you get," his wife retorted, slapping the drumstick onto Penny's plate.

Louise and Penny made a pretense of eating, finding the food much better than they had expected. Neither Ted nor Rhoda seemed hungry, and Mrs. Breen immediately called attention to their lack of appetite.

"Why, Ted! What's the matter you're not eating? Are you sick?"

The boy shook his head and got to his feet.

"I'm not hungry, Mom," he mumbled. "Excuse me, please. I have a date with a fellow at Riverview, and I have to hurry."

Before Mrs. Breen could detain him, he left the trailer.

"I can't understand that boy any more," she observed with a sad shake of her head. "He hasn't been himself lately."

The younger members of the Breen family quite made up for Ted and Rhoda's lack of appetite. Time and again they came to the table to have their plates refilled, until all that remained of the chicken was a few bones.

Penny and Louise felt quite certain that Rhoda

realized what her brother had done and was deeply humiliated by his thievery. To spare the girl further embarrassment, they declared that they must leave. However, as they were presenting their excuses, there was a loud rap on the door of the trailer. Peering from the curtained window, Mrs. Breen immediately lost her jovial manner.

"*He's* here again," she whispered. "What are we going to tell him, Pop?"

"Just give him the old stall," her husband suggested, undisturbed.

Reluctantly, Mrs. Breen went to open the door. Without waiting for an invitation, a well-dressed man of middle age entered the trailer. Penny immediately recognized him as Jay Franklin, who owned the Dorset Tourist Camp. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Breen," he began, his manner falsely cheerful. "I suppose you know why I am here again?"

"About the rent?"

"Precisely." Mr. Franklin consulted a small booklet. "You are behind one full month in your payments, as of course you must be aware. The amount totals eight dollars."

"Pop, pay the gentleman," Mrs. Breen commanded.

"Well, now, I ain't got that much on me," her husband rejoined, responding to his cue. "If you'll drop around in a day or two, Mr. Franklin—"

"You've been stalling for weeks! Either pay or your electric power will be cut off!"

"Oh, Mr. Franklin," pleaded Mrs. Breen, "you can't do that to us. Why, with our refrigerator on the blink, the milk will sour. And I got three little children."

The man regarded her with cold dislike.

"I am not interested in your personal problems, Mrs. Breen," he said, delivering his ultimatum. "Either settle your bill in full by tomorrow morning, or move on!"

CHAPTER

4

A RECORD ON ROCK

"WHAT'LL WE do?" Mrs. Breen murmured, gazing despairingly at her husband. "Where will we get the money?"

Penny stepped forward into Jay Franklin's range of vision. Observing her for the first time, he politely doffed his hat, a courtesy he had not bestowed upon the Breens.

"Mr. Franklin, have you a cheque book?" she inquired.

"Yes, I have," he responded with alacrity.

"Then I'll write a cheque for the eight dollars if that will be satisfactory," Penny offered. "The Breens are friends of mine."

"That will settle the bill in full, Miss Parker."

Whipping a fountain pen from his pocket, he offered it to her.

"Penny, we can't allow you to assume our debts," Rhoda protested. "Please don't—"

"Now Rhoda, it's only a loan to tide us over for a few days," Mrs. Breen interposed. "Ted will get a job and then we'll be able to pay it back."

Penny wrote out the cheque, and cutting short the profuse thanks of the Breens, declared that she and Louise must return home at once.

"Driving into Riverview?" Mr. Franklin inquired. "My car is in the garage, and I'll appreciate a lift to town."

"We'll be glad to take you, Mr. Franklin," Penny responded, but without enthusiasm.

Enroute to Riverview he endeavored to make himself an agreeable conversationalist.

"So the Breens are friends of yours?" he remarked casually.

"Well, not exactly," Penny corrected. "I met Rhoda at school and visited her for the first time today. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the family."

"They're a no-good lot. The old man never works, and the boy either can't or won't get a job."

"Do you have many such families, Mr. Franklin?"

"Oh, now and then. But I weed them out as fast as I can. One can't be soft and manage a tourist camp, you know."

Penny smiled, thinking that no person ever would accuse Mr. Franklin of being "soft." He had the

reputation of ruthless devotion to his own interests. Changing the subject, she remarked that Mrs. Marborough had returned to the city to take up residence at Rose Acres.

"Is that so?" Mr. Franklin inquired, showing interest in the information. "Will she recondition the house?"

Penny replied that she had no knowledge of the widow's future plans.

"No doubt Mrs. Marborough has returned to sell the property," Mr. Franklin said musingly. "I should like to buy that place if it goes for a fair price. I could make money by remodeling it into a tourist home."

"It would be a pity to turn such a lovely place into a roadside hotel," Louise remarked disapprovingly. "Penny and I hope that someday it will be restored as it was in the old days."

"There would be no profit in it as a residence," Mr. Franklin returned. "The house is located on a main road though, and as a tourist hotel, should pay."

Conversation languished, and a few minutes later, Penny dropped the man at his own home. Although she refrained from speaking of it to Louise, she neither liked nor trusted Jay Franklin. While it had been his right to eject the Breens from the tourist camp for non-payment of rent, she felt that he could have afforded to be more generous. She did not regret the impulse which had caused her to settle the debt even

though it meant that she must deprive herself of a few luxuries.

After leaving Louise at the Sidell house, Penny drove on home. Entering the living room, she greeted her father who had arrived from the newspaper office only a moment before. A late edition of the *Star* lay on the table, and she glanced carelessly at it, inquiring: "What's new, Dad?"

"Nothing worthy of mention," Mr. Parker returned.

Sinking down on the davenport, Penny scanned the front page. Immediately her attention was drawn to a brief item which appeared in an inconspicuous bottom corner.

"Here's something!" she exclaimed. "Why, how strange!"

"What is, Penny?"

"It says in this story that a big rock has been found on the farm of Carl Gleason! The stone bears writing thought to be of Elizabethan origin!"

"Let me see that paper," Mr. Parker said, striding across the room. "I didn't know any such story was used."

With obvious displeasure, the editor read the brief item which Penny indicated. Only twenty lines in length, it stated that a stone bearing both Elizabethan and Indian carving had been found on the nearby farm.

"I don't know how this item got past City Editor DeWitt," Mr. Parker declared. "It has all the earmarks of a hoax! You didn't by chance write it, Penny?"

"I certainly did not."

"It reads a little like a Jerry Livingston story," Mr. Parker said, glancing at the item a second time.

Going to a telephone he called first the *Star* office and then the home of the reporter, Jerry Livingston. After talking with the young man several minutes, he finally hung up the receiver.

"What did he say?" Penny asked curiously.

"Jerry wrote the story, and says it came from a reliable source. He's coming over here to talk to me about it."

Within ten minutes the reporter arrived at the Parker home. Penny loitered in the living room to hear the conversation. Jerry long had been a particular friend of hers and she hoped that her father would not reprimand him for any mistake he might have made.

"Have a chair," Mr. Parker greeted the young man cordially. "Now tell me where you got hold of that story."

"Straight from the farmer, Carl Gleason," Jerry responded. "The stone was dug up on his farm early this morning."

"Did you see it yourself?"

"Not yet. It was hauled to the Museum of Natural Science. Thought I'd drop around there on my way home and look it over."

"I wish you would," requested the editor. "While the stone may be an authentic one, I have a deep suspicion someone is trying to pull a fast trick."

"I'm sorry if I've made a boner, Chief."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you," Mr. Parker assured him. "If the story is a fake, it was up to DeWitt to question it at the desk. Better look at the rock though, before you write any more about it."

As Jerry arose to leave, Penny jumped up from her own chair.

"I'd like to see that stone too!" she declared. "Jerry, do you mind if I go along with you?"

"Glad to have you," he said heartily.

Before Penny could get her hat and coat, Mrs. Maud Weems, the Parker housekeeper, appeared in the doorway to announce dinner. She was a stout, pleasant woman of middle-age and had looked after Penny since Mrs. Parker's death many years before.

"Penny, where are you going now?" she asked, her voice disclosing mild disapproval.

"Only over to the museum."

"You've not had your dinner."

"Oh, yes, I have," Penny laughed. "I dined on chicken at the Dorset Tourist Camp. I'll be home in an hour or so."

Jerking coat and hat from the hall closet, she fled from the house before Mrs. Weems could offer further objections. Jerry made a more ceremonious departure, joining Penny on the front porch.

At the curb stood the reporter's mud-splattered coupe. The interior was only slightly less dirty, and before getting in, Penny industriously brushed off the seat.

"Tell me all about this interesting stone which was found at the Gleason farm," she commanded, as the car started down the street.

"Nothing to tell except what was in the paper," Jerry shrugged. "The rock has some writing on it, supposedly similar to early Elizabethan script. And there are a few Indian characters."

"How could such a stone turn up at Riverview?"

"Carl Gleason found it while he was plowing a field. Apparently, it had been in the ground for many years."

"I should think so if it bears Elizabethan writing!" Penny laughed. "Why, that would date it practically in Shakespeare's time!"

"It's written in the style used by the earliest settlers of this country," Jerry said defensively. "You know, before we had radios and automobiles and things, this land of ours was occupied by Indians."

"Do tell!" Penny teased.

"The natives camped all along the river, and there may have been an early English settlement here. So

it's perfectly possible that such a stone could be found."

"Anyway, I am curious to see it," Penny replied.

The car drew up before a large stone building with Doric columns. Climbing a long series of steps to the front door, Penny and Jerry entered the museum through a turnstile.

"I want to see the curator, Mr. Kaleman," the reporter remarked, turning toward a private office near the entrance. "I'll be with you in a minute."

While waiting, Penny wandered slowly about, inspecting the various display cases. She was admiring the huge skeleton of a dinosaur when Jerry returned, followed by an elderly man who wore spectacles. The reporter introduced the curator, who began to talk enthusiastically of the ancient stone which had been delivered to the museum that afternoon.

"I shall be very glad to show it to you," he said, leading the way down a long corridor. "For the present, pending investigation, we have it stored in the basement."

"What's the verdict?" Jerry inquired. "Do museum authorities consider the writing authentic?"

"I should not wish to be quoted," Mr. Kaleman prefaced his little speech. "However, an initial inspection has led us to believe that the stone bears ancient writings. You understand that it will take exhaustive study before the museum would venture to state this as a fact."

"The stone couldn't have been faked?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"Always that is a possibility," Mr. Kaleman acknowledged as he unlocked the door of a basement room. "However, the stone has weathered evenly, it appears to have been buried many years, and there are other signs which point to the authenticity of the writing."

The curator switched on an electric light which disclosed a room cluttered with miscellaneous objects. There were empty mummy cases, boxes of excelsior, and various stuffed animals. At the rear of the room was a large rust colored stone which might have weighed a quarter of a ton.

"Here it is," Mr. Kaleman declared, giving the rock an affectionate pat. "Notice the uniform coloring throughout. And note the lettering chiseled on the surface. You will see that the grooves do not differ appreciably from the remainder of the stone as would be the case if the lettering were of recent date. It is my belief—don't quote me, of course—that this writing may open a new and fascinating page of history."

Penny bent to inspect the crude writing. " 'Here laeth Ananias' " she read slowly aloud. "Why, that might be a joke! Wasn't Ananias a dreadful prevaricator?"

"Ananias was a common name in the early days," Mr. Kaleman said, displeased by the remark. "Now on the underside of this stone which you cannot see,

there appears part of a quaint message which begins: 'Soon after you goe for Englande we came hither.' "

"What does it mean?" questioned Jerry.

"This is only my theory, you understand. I believe the message may have been written by an early settler and left for someone who had gone to England but expected to return. The writing breaks off, suggesting that it may have been continued on another stone."

"In that case, similar rocks may be found near here," Jerry said thoughtfully.

"It is an interesting possibility. On the underside, this stone also contains a number of Indian characters, no doubt added at a later date. So far we have not been able to decipher them."

"Just why does the stone have historical value?" Penny interposed.

"Because there never was any proof that English colonists settled in this part of the state," Mr. Kaleman explained. "If we could prove such were the case, our contribution to history would be a vital one."

Penny and Jerry asked many other questions, and finally left the museum. Both had been impressed not only with the huge stone but by the curator's sincere manner.

"Mr. Kaleman certainly believes the writing is genuine," Penny declared thoughtfully. "All the same, anyone knows a carved rock can be made to look very ancient. And that name Ananias makes me wonder."

"The Chief may be right about it being a fake,"

Jerry returned. "But if it is, who planted the stone on Gleason's farm? And who would go to so much unnecessary work just to play a joke?"

Frowning, the reporter started to cross the street just as an automobile bearing Texas license plates went past, close to the curb. As Jerry leaped backwards to safety, the automobile halted. Two men occupied the front seat, and the driver, a well-dressed man of fifty, leaned from the window.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, addressing Jerry, "we're trying to locate a boy named Ted Wiegand. He and his sister may be living with a family by the name of Breen. Could you tell me how to find them?"

"Sorry, but I can't," Jerry answered. "I never heard either of the names."

"Why, I know both Ted and Rhoda Wiegand," Penny interposed quickly. "They're living at the Dorset Tourist Camp."

"How do we get there?" the driver of the Texas car inquired.

Jerry provided the requested information. Thanking him, the stranger and his companion drove on down the street.

"I wonder who they can be?" Penny speculated, staring after the car. "And why did they come all the way from Texas to see Rhoda and Ted?"

"Friends of yours?" Jerry asked carelessly.

"I like Rhoda very much. Ted seems to be a rather questionable character. I wonder—"

"You wonder what?" the reporter prompted, helping Penny into the parked automobile.

"It just came to me, Jerry!" she answered gravely. "Those men may be officers from Texas sent here to arrest Ted for something he's done! I never meant to set them on his trail, but I may be responsible for his arrest!"

CHAPTER

5

STRANGERS FROM TEXAS

JERRY SMILED broadly as he edged the car from its parking space by the curb.

"You certainly have a vivid imagination, Penny," he accused. "Those two men didn't look like plain-clothes men to me. Anyway, if Ted Wiegand had committed an illegal act, wouldn't it be your duty to turn him over to the authorities?"

"I suppose so," Penny admitted unwillingly. "Ted stole one of Truman Crocker's chickens today. It was a dreadful thing to do, but in a way you couldn't blame him too much. I'm sure the Breens needed food."

"Stealing is stealing. I don't know the lad, but if a fellow is crooked in small things, he's usually dishonest otherwise as well. Speaking of Truman Crocker, he was the man who hauled the big rock to the museum."

"Was he?" Penny inquired, not particularly interested in the information. "I understand he does a

great deal of rock hauling around Riverview. A queer fellow."

Becoming absorbed in her own thoughts, Penny had little to say until the car drew up in front of the Parker home.

"Won't you come in?" she invited Jerry as she alighted.

"Can't tonight," he declined regretfully. "I have a date at a bowling alley."

Mr. Parker had been called downtown to attend a meeting, Penny discovered upon entering the house. Unable to tell him of her trip to the museum, she tried to interest Mrs. Weems in the story. However, the housekeeper, who was eager to start for a moving-picture theatre, soon cut her short.

"Excuse me, Penny, but I really must be leaving or I'll be late," she apologized, putting on her hat.

"I thought you were interested in mystery, Mrs. Weems."

"Mystery, yes," smiled the housekeeper. "To tell you the truth, though, I can't become very excited over an old stone, no matter what's written on it."

After Mrs. Weems had gone, Penny was left alone in the big house. She sat down to read a book but soon laid it aside. To pass the time, she thought she would make a batch of fudge. But, no sooner had she mixed the sugar and chocolate together than it seemed like a useless occupation, so she set aside the pan for Mrs. Weems to finish upon her return from the movie.

"I know what I'll do!" she thought suddenly. "I wonder why I didn't think of it sooner?"

Hastening to the telephone she called her chum, Louise, asking her to come over at once.

"What's up?" the other inquired curiously.

"We're going to carry out a philanthropic enterprise, Lou! I'll tell you about it when you get here!"

"One of these days you'll choke on some of those big words," Louise grumbled. "All right, I'll come."

Fifteen minutes later she arrived at the Parker home to find Penny, garbed in an apron, working industriously in the kitchen.

"Say, what is this?" Louise demanded suspiciously. "If you tricked me into helping you with the dishes, I'm going straight home!"

"Oh, relax," Penny laughed. "The dishes were done hours ago. We're going to help out the Old Wishing Well."

"I wish you would explain what you mean."

"It's this way, Lou. The Breens are as poor as church mice, and they need food. At the Marborough place this afternoon Rhoda made a wish—that her family would have more to eat. Well, it's up to us to make that wish come true."

"You're preparing a basket of food to take out to the camp?"

"That's the general idea. We can leave it on the doorstep of the trailer and slip away without revealing our identity."

"Why, your idea is a splendid one!" Louise suddenly approved. "Of course Mrs. Weems said it would be all right to fix the basket of food?"

"Oh, she won't mind. I know she would want me to do it if she were here."

Swinging open the porcelain door of the ice box, Penny peered into the illuminated shelves. The refrigerator was unusually well stocked, for Mrs. Weems had baked that day in anticipation of week-end appetites. Without hesitation, Penny handed out a meat loaf, a plum pudding, bunches of radishes, scrubbed carrots, celery, and a dozen fresh eggs.

"Dash down to the basement and get some canned goods from the supply shelf," she instructed Louise briskly. "We ought to have jelly too, and a sample of Mrs. Weems' strawberry preserves."

"You do the dashing, if you don't mind," her chum demurred. "I prefer not to become too deeply involved in this affair."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems won't care—not a bit," Penny returned as she started for the basement. "She's the most charitable person in the world."

In a minute she was back, her arms laden with heavy canned goods. Finding a market basket in the garage, the girls packed the food, wrapping perishables carefully in waxed paper.

"There! We can't crowd another thing into the basket," Penny declared at last.

"The ice-box is as bare as Mother Hubbard's cup-

board," Louise rejoined. "What will the Parker family eat tomorrow?"

"Oh, Mrs. Weems can buy more. She'll be a good sport about it, I know."

With no misgivings, Penny carried the heavy basket to the garage and loaded it into the car. Discovering that the gasoline gauge registered low, she skillfully siphoned an extra two gallons from her father's car, and then announced that she was ready to go.

"Don't you ever patronize a filling station?" Louise inquired as her chum headed the automobile down the street.

"Oh, now and then," Penny grinned. "After that cheque I wrote for the Breens' rent, I'm feeling rather poor. Dad is much better able to buy gasoline than I, and he won't begrudge me a couple of gallons."

"You certainly have your family well trained," Louise sighed. "I wish I knew how you get by with it."

The car toured through Riverview and presently arrived at the entrance of the Dorset Tourist Camp. An attendant stopped the girls, but allowed them to drive on when he learned that they did not wish to make reservations for a cabin. Penny drew up not far from where the Breen trailer was parked.

"A light is still burning there," Louise observed. "We'll have to be careful if we don't want to be seen."

As Penny lifted the heavy basket from the rear compartment of the automobile, she noticed another car standing not far away. It looked somewhat familiar

and in studying it more intently she noted the license plate.

"Why, it's that same Texas car!" she exclaimed. "Those men must still be here."

"What car? What men?"

"Oh, this evening two strangers inquired the way to this tourist camp," Penny explained briefly. "They said they were looking for Ted Wiegand."

"Friends of his?"

"I don't know who they were or what they wanted. It struck me as odd though, that they would come from such a long distance."

"Whoever they are, they must be at the trailer now," Louise said after a moment. "Should we leave the basket on the doorstep or wait until they've gone?"

"We can't very well wait, Lou. They might decide to stay half the night."

Carrying the basket between them, the girls moved noiselessly toward the trailer. Blinds had not been drawn and they could see Mr. and Mrs. Breen, Rhoda, and the two men seated at the table carrying on an animated discussion.

"I wish I knew why those Texas fellows came here," Penny remarked thoughtfully. "If we wanted to find out—"

"I'll not listen at any window!" Louise cut her short.

"I was merely thinking we *could*. Of course, I never would do such an ill-bred thing."

"I'm sure you won't," Louise replied with emphasis. "For a very good reason too! I shall take you away before temptation sways you."

Depositing the basket of food on the trailer doorstep, she forcibly pulled Penny to the waiting car.

CHAPTER

6

A WISH FULFILLED

AT SCHOOL the next morning, both Penny and Louise eagerly awaited some indication from Rhoda Wiegand that the basket of food had been discovered by the Breen family. The girl had failed to appear at five minutes to nine, and they began to wonder if she intended to absent herself from classes.

"Oh, by the way, what did Mrs. Weems say about last night's little episode?" Louise asked her chum curiously.

"Entirely too much," Penny sighed. "She sent me three thousand words on the budget problems of a housekeeper! If you don't mind, let's allow the subject to rest in peace."

It was time for the final school bell, and the two girls started toward the assembly room. Just then Rhoda, breathless from hurrying, came into the hallway. Her eyes sparkled and obviously, she was rather excited.

"Girls, something strange happened last night!" she greeted Penny and Louise. "You'll never guess!"

"We couldn't possibly," Louise said soberly.

"Two baskets of food were left at the door of our trailer! It's silly to say it, I know, but it seems as if my wish at the old well must have had something to do with it."

"Did you say *two* baskets of food were left?" Louise questioned, gazing sideways at Penny.

"Yes, one came early in the evening. Then this morning when Mrs. Breen opened the door, she found still another. You don't suppose any of the members of the Palette Club did it, do you? We shouldn't like to accept charity—"

"I'll ask the girls if you want me to," Penny offered hastily. "If any of them did, nothing was said about it to me."

"Maybe the old well granted your wish, Rhoda," Louise added. "You know, folks say it has a reputation for doing good deeds."

The ringing of the school bell brought the conversation to an abrupt end. However, as Louise and Penny went to their seats, the latter whispered:

"Who do you suppose left that second basket on the Breen doorstep?"

"Probably one of the other club members had the same idea you did," Louise responded. "Anyway, the Breens will be well fed for a few days at least."

At recess Penny made a point of questioning every

member of the Palette Club. Not one of the girls would admit having carried the basket to the trailer park, but all were agreed that Rhoda should be invited to join the art organization. Without exception, they liked the girl after becoming acquainted with her.

"The mystery deepens," Penny commented to Louise as they wandered, arm in arm, about the school yard. "If no one in the Palette Club prepared the basket, then who did do it?"

"I guess we'll have to attribute it to the old wishing well after all," Louise chuckled. "Let me see your ears, my pet."

"What for? Don't you think I ever wash them?"

"I merely want to see if they've grown since we were at the Marborough place. Why, goodness me, I believe they are larger!"

Before Penny could think of a suitable retort, Rhoda joined the girls. Curious to learn more of the two Texas men who had arrived in Riverview, they gave the newcomer every opportunity to speak of it. As she remained uncommunicative, Penny brought up the subject by mentioning that two strangers had asked her how they might locate the trailer family.

"Yes, they found us all right," Rhoda replied briefly. "Mr. Coaten came to see Ted."

"An old friend, I suppose," Louise remarked.

"Not exactly. I can't figure out just why he did come here."

Rhoda frowned and lapsed into silence. Penny and

Louise did not question her further, and a few minutes later recess ended.

The affairs of the Breen family concerned Penny only slightly. Although she kept wondering why Mr. Coaten and his companion were in Riverview, she gave far more thought to the stone which had been dug up on the Gleason farm. Directly after school she proposed to Louise that they drive into the country and interview the farmer.

"I don't mind the trip," her chum said, "but why are you so interested in an old rock?"

"Oh, Dad thinks the whole story may be a hoax. I'd like to learn the truth, if I can."

Mindful that in the past Penny had brought the *Riverview Star* many an important "scoop," Louise was very willing to accompany her on the trip. Four-thirty found the two girls at the Gleason farm in conversation with the old farmer.

"I've been pestered to death ever since that rock was found here," he told them somewhat crossly. "There's nothing new to tell. I was plowing in the south field back of the barn, when I turned it up. I didn't pay much attention until Jay Franklin come along and said the writing on it might interest the museum folks. He gave me a couple of dollars, and paid to have old man Crocker haul it to town."

"I didn't know Jay Franklin had an interest in the stone," Penny remarked. "You say he gave you two dollars for it?"

"That's right," the farmer nodded. "I was glad to have the rock hauled off the place."

Satisfied that they could learn no more, Penny and Louise inspected the hole from which the stone had been removed, and then drove toward Riverview.

"Mr. Gleason seemed honest enough," Penny commented thoughtfully. "If the rock was deliberately planted on his farm I don't believe he had anything to do with it."

"He isn't sufficiently clever to plan and carry out an idea like that," Louise added. "Maybe the writing on the rock is genuine."

"The curator of the museum thinks it may be. All the same, I'll stack Dad's opinion against them all."

The car approached the old Marborough place, and Penny deliberately slowed down. To the surprise of the girls, they observed two automobiles parked in front of the property.

"It looks as if Mrs. Marborough has guests today," Penny commented. "Shall we stop and say hello?"

"Well, I don't know," Louise replied doubtfully as the car drew up at the edge of the road. "We're not really acquainted with her, and with others there—"

"They're leaving now," Penny said, jerking her head to draw attention to a group of ladies coming down the walk toward the street.

The visitors all were known to the two girls as women prominent in Riverview club circles. Mrs. Buckmyer, a stout, pompous lady who led the proces-

sion, was speaking to the others in an agitated voice.

"In all my life I never was treated with less courtesy! Mrs. Marborough at least might have invited us into her house!"

"I always understood that she was a queer person," contributed another, "but one naturally would expect better manners from a Marborough."

"I shouldn't object to her manners if only she would allow the Pilgrimage Committee the use of her house," added a third member of the group. "What a pity that she refuses to consider opening it during the Festival Week."

Still chattering indignantly, the women entered their separate cars and drove away.

"What did you make of that?" Louise asked in perplexity.

"Apparently Mrs. Marborough gave them the brush off," Penny chuckled. "I know Mrs. Buckmyer heads the Pilgrimage Committee."

"What's that?"

"Haven't you heard about it, Louise? A group of club women decided to raise money by conducting a tour of old houses. In this community there are a number of places which date back over a hundred years."

"And people will pay money to see them?"

"That's the general idea. Festival Week has been set for the twenty-sixth of this month. During a five-day period the various homes are open, gardens will be

on display, and costume parties may be held at them."

"There's only one colonial house that I'd care about getting inside," Louise said. "I should like to see the interior of Rose Acres."

"Maybe we can do it now. Mrs. Marborough invited us to visit her again."

"Yes, but did she really mean it?"

"Why not find out?" Penny laughed, swinging open the car door.

Entering the grounds, the girls saw that very little had been done to the property since their last visit. A half-hearted attempt had been made to rake one side of the lawn and an overgrown lilac bush had been mercilessly mutilated. Shutters on the house remained closed and the entire place had a gloomy, deserted appearance.

Penny rapped on the door. Evidently Mrs. Marborough had noted the approach of the two girls for she responded to their knock immediately.

"Good afternoon," Penny began, "we were driving by and thought we would drop in to see you again."

"How nice of you," Mrs. Marborough smiled. "Look over the garden as much as you please."

"The garden—" Louise faltered, gazing quickly at Penny.

"Or make wishes at the well," Mrs. Marborough went on hastily. "Go anywhere you like, and I'll join you as soon as I get a wrap."

The door closed gently in their faces.

"Who wants to see a tangle of weeds?" Louise demanded in a whisper. "Why didn't Mrs. Marborough invite us into the house?"

"Why indeed?" echoed Penny, frowning thoughtfully. "There can be but one reason! She has a dark secret which she is trying to hide from the world!"

CHAPTER

7

PENNY'S DISCOVERY

"HIDING A secret, my eye!" laughed Louise. "Penny Parker, sometimes I think that every person in Riverview suggests mystery and intrigue to you!"

"Then you explain why Mrs. Marborough doesn't invite us into her house!" Penny challenged her chum. "And why did she turn the members of the Pilgrimage Committee away?"

"Oh, probably the place isn't fixed up the way she wants it yet."

"That's no reason. No, she has a different one than that, Lou, and I'm curious to learn what it is."

"You're always curious," Louise teased, taking Penny by the arm. "Come along. Let's get a drink at the well."

While the girls were lowering the bucket into the bricked cavern, Mrs. Marborough joined them, a woolen shawl thrown over her head and shoulders.

"I've not had time to get much work done yet," she apologized. "I really must hire a man to clean up the grounds."

"Then you have decided to make your home here?" Louise inquired eagerly.

"For the present, I may. Much depends upon how a certain project turns out."

Penny and Louise waited hopefully, but Mrs. Marborough said no more. Changing the subject, she inquired about Rhoda Wiégand and the other members of the Palette Club.

"I like young people," she declared brightly. "Do tell your friends to come to Rose Acres whenever they wish."

"A rather strange thing occurred yesterday," Penny said suddenly. "Rhoda made a wish here at the well, and it came true."

"What was the wish?" the old lady inquired with curiosity.

"That the people with whom she lives might have more food. Two baskets were left at the trailer camp. Louise and I were responsible for one of them, but we can't account for the other."

"Very interesting," Mrs. Marborough commented. "In years past, a great many wishes which were made here, apparently came true. So I can't say that I am surprised."

"To what do you attribute it?" Louise asked quickly.

"Chance perhaps," Mrs. Marborough smiled. "One cannot explain such things."

A chill, penetrating wind blew from the direction of the river. Shivering, Louise drew her jacket collar closer about her neck, remarking rather pointedly that the weather was turning colder. Even then, Mrs. Marborough did not suggest that the girls enter the house. A moment later, however, she excused herself and went inside, leaving them alone in the garden.

"It does seem odd that she acts so secretive," Louise commented. "I'm inclined to agree with members of the Pilgrimage Committee that her manners aren't the best."

"Perhaps you'll finally decide that I am right!" Penny said triumphantly. "Take my word for it, there's something inside the house she doesn't want anyone to see!"

Louise started slowly toward the road, only to pause as her chum proposed that they walk to the river and call upon Truman Crocker, the stonecutter.

"You intend to tell him who stole his chicken?" Louise asked in surprise.

Penny shook her head. "No, I'll let him discover it for himself. I want to talk to him about that big rock he hauled to the museum."

Louise could not imagine what useful information her chum might expect to gain, but she obediently trailed Penny through the rear yard of Rose Acres, down a sloping path which led to the river.

"I hope you know the way," she remarked dubiously as the going became more difficult, and they were forced to move slowly.

"Oh, we can't miss the cabin. Crocker's place is the only one near here," Penny responded.

The trail was a narrow one, so infrequently used that bushes and vines had overgrown it in many places. Finally emerging on an open hillside, the girls were able to gaze down upon the winding river. Recent rains had swollen it to the very edges of the banks, and from a distance Truman Crocker's shack appeared to be situated dangerously close to the water.

"Wouldn't you think he would soon be flooded out?" Louise commented, pausing to catch her breath. "I shouldn't care to live so near the river."

"Oh, the water never comes much higher," Penny rejoined. "A few years ago the city built some sort of river control system which takes care of the spill should there be any. Anyway, Crocker's place wouldn't represent much of a loss if it did wash away."

The girls regained their breath, and then started down the slope. Penny, who was leading the way, did not pay particular attention to the rutty path. Suddenly catching her shoe in a small hole, she tripped and fell sideways.

"Ooh, my arm!" she squealed. "I struck it on a big rock!"

Louise helped Penny to her feet, brushing dirt from the girl's skirt.

"You've ripped your stocking," she said sympathetically.

"I guess I'm lucky it wasn't my head," Penny returned gazing ruefully at the tear. "Let's sit down and rest a minute."

Seating herself on the large smooth rock, she gingerly examined a bruised place on her elbow. Louise stood beside her, plucking burs from her chum's sweater.

"I'm all right now," Penny said a moment later, getting up. "Why, Lou! Do you see what I've been sitting on?"

"A rock, my pet."

"A stone that looks exactly like the one at the museum!" Penny cried excitedly.

"All rocks are pretty much alike, aren't they?"

"Certainly not," Penny corrected. "There are any number of varieties. This one is quartz unless I'm mistaken and it *does* resemble the one at the museum."

"Maybe you can find some writing on it," Louise teased. "The rock only weighs two or three hundred pounds. Shall I lift it for you so you can see the under side?"

"Don't bother," Penny retorted, eagerly examining the stone. "I've already found it."

"Found what?"

"The writing! I *knew* this stone looked like the one at the museum!"

Louise was certain that her chum merely pretended to have made such an important discovery. However, as Penny continued to examine the rock in an intent, absorbed way, she decided to see for herself.

"Why, it's true!" she exclaimed incredulously. "There *is* writing on the stone!"

Carved letters, so dimmed by age and weathering processes that they scarcely remained legible, had been cut unevenly in the hard surface.

"'Went hence vnto heaven 1599,'" Louise deciphered slowly. "Why, 1599 would date this stone almost before there were known settlers in the country!"

"Almost—but not quite," replied Penny. "Historians believe there were other settlements before that date. Obviously, this is a burial stone similar to the one found on the Gleason farm."

"If it's such an old rock why was it never discovered before?"

"The stone may be a fake, but that's not for us to try to figure out. We've made an important discovery and the museum is sure to be interested!"

"Don't forget that this is on Mrs. Marborough's property," Louise reminded her chum. "We'll have to tell her about it."

Retracing their way to Rose Acres, the girls knocked on the door. Mrs. Marborough soon appeared, looking none too pleased by their unexpected return.

"What is it?" she asked, blocking the doorway so that the girls could not see beyond her into the living room.

Breathlessly, Penny told of finding the dated stone on the hillside.

"Did you know such a rock was there?" she asked eagerly.

"I've never seen any stone with writing on it," Mrs. Marborough replied. "Goodness knows there are plenty of boulders on my property though."

"Another stone similar to it was found yesterday on the Gleason farm," Louise revealed. "Do come and see it, Mrs. Marborough."

Before the widow could reply, the three were startled by heavy footsteps on the veranda. Turning, the girls saw that Jay Franklin had approached without being observed. Politely, he doffed his hat.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation," he said, bowing again to Mrs. Marborough. "You were saying something about a rock which bears writing?"

"We found it on the hillside near here," Penny explained. "It has a date—1599."

"Then it must be a mate to the stone discovered by Mr. Gleason!"

"I'm sure it is."

"Will you take me to the spot where you found it?" Mr. Franklin requested. "I am tremendously interested."

"Of course," Penny agreed, but her voice lacked enthusiasm.

She glanced toward Louise, noticing that her chum did not look particularly elated either. Neither could have explained the feeling, but Jay Franklin's arrival detracted from the pleasure of their discovery. Although ashamed of their suspicions, they were afraid that the man might try to take credit for finding the stone.

CHAPTER

8

A MOVING LIGHT

AS IF to confirm the thought of the two girls, Jay Franklin remarked that should the newly discovered stone prove similar to the one found at the Gleason farm, he would immediately have it hauled to the Riverview museum.

"Isn't that for Mrs. Marborough to decide?" Penny asked dryly. "The rock is on her land, you know."

"To be sure, to be sure," Mr. Franklin nodded, brushing aside the matter of ownership as if it were of slight consequence.

Mrs. Marborough had gone into the house for a coat. Reappearing, she followed Mr. Franklin and the two girls down the trail where the huge stone lay.

"Did you ever notice this rock?" Penny questioned the mistress of Rose Acres.

"Never," she replied, "but then I doubt that I ever walked in this particular locality before."

Jay Franklin stooped to examine the carving, excit-

edly declaring that it was similar to the marking of the Gleason stone.

"And here are other characters!" he exclaimed, fingering well-weathered grooves which had escaped Penny's attention. "Indian picture writing!"

"How do you account for two types of carving on the same stone?" Louise inquired skeptically.

"The Indian characters may have been added at a later date," Mr. Franklin answered. "For all we know, this rock may be one of the most valuable relics ever found in our state! From the historical standpoint, of course. The stone has no commercial value."

"I imagine the museum will want it," Penny said thoughtfully.

"Exactly what I was thinking." Mr. Franklin turned toward Mrs. Marborough to ask: "You would not object to the museum having this stone?"

"Why, no," she replied. "It has no value to me."

"Then with your permission, I'll arrange to have it hauled to Riverview without delay. I'll buy the stone from you."

"The museum is entirely welcome to it."

"There is a possibility that the museum will refuse the stone. In that event you would have the expense of hauling it away again. By purchasing it outright, I can relieve you of all responsibility."

Giving Mrs. Marborough no opportunity to protest, the real estate man forced a crisp two dollar bill into her unwilling hand.

"There," he said jovially, "now I am the owner of the stone. I'll just run down to Truman Crocker's place and ask him to do the hauling for me."

The wind was cold, and after Mr. Franklin had gone, Mrs. Marborough went quickly to the house, leaving the girls to await his return.

"I knew something like this would happen," Penny declared in annoyance. "Now it's Mr. Franklin's stone, and the next thing we know, he'll claim that he discovered it too!"

Louise nodded gloomily, replying that only bad luck had brought the real estate agent to Rose Acres that particular afternoon.

"I have a sneaking notion he came here to buy Mrs. Marborough's house," Penny said musingly. "He thinks it would make a good tourist place!"

For half an hour the girls waited patiently. Neither Jay Franklin nor Truman Crocker appeared, so at last they decided it was a waste of time to remain longer. Arriving at home, shortly before the dinner hour, Penny found her father there ahead of her. To her surprise she learned that he already knew of the stone which had been discovered at Rose Acres.

"Information certainly travels fast," she commented. "I suppose Jay Franklin must have peddled the story the minute he reached town."

"Yes, he called at the *Star* office to report he had found a stone similar to the one unearthed at the Gleason farm," Mr. Parker nodded.

"*He* found it!" Penny cried indignantly. "Oh, I knew that old publicity seeker would steal all the credit! Louise and I discovered that rock, and I hope you say so in the *Star*."

"Franklin let it drop that he will offer the stone to the museum for five hundred dollars."

"Well, of all the cheap tricks!" Penny exclaimed, her indignation mounting. "He bought that rock for two dollars, pretending he meant to give it to the museum. Just wait until Mrs. Marborough hears about it!"

"Suppose you tell me the facts," Mr. Parker invited.

Penny obligingly revealed how she had found the rock by stumbling against it in descending a steep path to the river. Upon learning of the transaction which Jay Franklin had concluded with Mrs. Marborough, Mr. Parker smiled ruefully.

"Franklin always did have a special talent for making money the easy way," he declared. "I'll be sorry to see him cheat the museum."

"Dad, you don't think Mr. Kaleman will be foolish enough to pay money for that rock?" Penny asked in dismay.

"I am afraid he may. He seems convinced that the Gleason stone is a genuine specimen."

"You still believe the writing to be faked?"

"I do," Mr. Parker responded. "I'll stake my reputation upon it! I said as much to Jay Franklin today and he rather pointedly hinted that he would appreci-

ate having me keep my theories entirely to myself."

"I guess he doesn't understand you very well," Penny smiled. "Now you'll be more determined than ever to expose the hoax—if hoax it is."

Mr. Franklin's action thoroughly annoyed her for she felt that he had deliberately deceived Mrs. Marborough. Wishing to tell Louise Sidell what he had done, she immediately telephoned her chum.

"I've learned something you'll want to hear," she disclosed. "No, I can't tell you over the 'phone. Meet me directly after dinner. We might go for a sail on the river."

The previous summer Mr. Parker had purchased a small sailboat which he kept at a summer camp on the river. Occasionally he enjoyed an outing, but work occupied so much of his time that his daughter and her friends derived far more enjoyment from the craft than he did.

Louise accepted the invitation with alacrity, and later that evening, driving to the river with Penny, listened indignantly to a colored account of how Jay Franklin would profit at the widow's expense. She agreed with her chum that he had acted dishonestly in trying to sell the stone.

"Perhaps Mrs. Marborough can claim ownership even now," she suggested thoughtfully.

"Not without a lawsuit," Penny offered as her opinion. "She sold the rock to Mr. Franklin for two

dollars. Remember his final words: 'Now I am the owner of the stone.' Oh, he intended to trick her even then!"

The car turned into a private dirt road and soon halted beside a cabin of logs. A cool breeze came from the river, but the girls were prepared for it, having worn warm slack suits.

"It's a grand night to sail," Penny declared, leading the way to the boathouse. "We should get as far as the Marborough place if the breeze holds."

Launching the dinghy, Louise raised the sail while her chum took charge of the tiller. As the canvas filled, the boat heeled slightly and began to pick up speed.

"Now use discretion," Louise warned as the dinghy tilted farther and farther sideways. "It's all very well to sail on the bias, but I prefer not to get a ducking!"

During the trip up the river the girls were kept too busy to enjoy the beauty of the night. However, as the boat approached Truman Crocker's shack, the breeze suddenly died, barely providing steerage way. Holding the tiller by the pressure of her knee, Penny slumped into a half-reclining position.

"Want me to steer for awhile?" Louise inquired.

"Not until we turn and start for home. We'll have the current with us then, which will help, even if the breeze has died."

Curiously, Penny gazed toward Truman Crocker's

cabin which was entirely dark. High on the hillside stood the old Marborough mansion and there, too, no lights showed.

"Everyone seems to have gone to bed," she remarked. "It must be late."

Louise held her watch so that she could read the figures in the bright moonlight and observed that it was only a quarter past ten.

"Anyway, we should be starting for home," Penny said. "Coming about!"

Louise prepared to lower her head as the boom swung over, but to her surprise the maneuver was not carried through. Instead of turning, the dinghy kept steadily on its course.

"What's the idea?" she demanded. "Isn't there enough breeze to carry us around?"

"I was watching that light up on the hill," Penny explained.

Louise twisted in the seat to look over her shoulder. "What light, Penny?"

"It's gone now, but I saw it an instant ago. There it is again!"

Unmistakably, both girls saw the moving light far up the hill. As they watched, it seemed to approach the dark Marborough house, and then receded.

"Probably someone with a lantern," Louise remarked indifferently.

"But why should anyone be prowling about Mrs. Marborough's place at this hour?"

"It does seem strange."

Deliberately, Penny steered the sailboat toward the beach.

"I think we should investigate," she declared firmly. "Everyone knows Mrs. Marborough lives alone. Someone may be attempting to break into the house!"

CHAPTER

9

MYSTERIOUS PROWLERS

"OH, PENNY, there must be a perfectly good reason for that moving light," Louise protested as the boat grated on the sand. "You only want an excuse for going to the Marborough place!"

"Perhaps," her chum acknowledged with a grin. "Jump out and pull us in, will you please?"

"My ankles are nice and dry and I like them that way," Louise retorted. "If it's all the same, you do the jumping."

"All right, I don't mind—much." With a laugh, Penny gingerly stepped from the dinghy into shallow water. She pulled the boat farther up onto the shore so that her chum was able to climb out without wetting her feet. Together they furled the sail and removed the steering apparatus which they hid in the nearby bushes.

"I don't see a light now," Louise protested after their various tasks had been completed. "Must we climb that steep hill?"

"We must," Penny declared firmly, taking her by the hand. "Something may be wrong at Mrs. Marborough's and we ought to find out about it."

"You just love to investigate things," Louise accused. "You know as well as I do that there's not likely to be anything amiss."

"Someone may be prowling about the grounds! At any rate, my feet are cramped from sitting so long in the boat. We need exercise."

Finding a trail, the girls climbed it until they were within a hundred yards of the Marborough mansion. Emerging from behind a clump of lilac bushes they suddenly obtained an unobstructed view of the yard.

"There's the light!" Penny whispered. "See! By the wishing well!"

To their knowledge the girls had made no unusual sound. Yet, apparently the person who prowled in the yard was aware of their approach. As they watched, the lantern was extinguished. Simultaneously, the moon, which had been so bright, moved under a dark cloud.

For several seconds the girls could not see the shadowy figure by the well. When the moon again emerged from behind its shield no one was visible in the yard.

"Whoever was there has hidden!" Penny whispered

excitedly. "Louise, after we leave he may attempt to break into the house!"

"What ought we to do?"

"I think we should warn Mrs. Marborough."

"The house is dark," Louise said dubiously. "She's probably in bed."

"Wouldn't you want to know about it if someone were prowling about your premises?"

"Yes, of course—but—"

"Then come on," Penny urged, starting through the tangle of tall grass. "Mrs. Marborough should be very grateful for the warning. It may prevent a burglary."

In crossing the yard, the girls kept an alert watch of the bushes but could see no one hiding behind them. Nevertheless, they felt certain that the prowler could not have left the grounds.

Penny pounded on the rear door of the Marborough house.

"Not so loud," Louise warned nervously.

"Mrs. Marborough probably is asleep. I want to awaken her."

"You will, don't worry!"

Penny repeated the knock many times, and then was rewarded by the approach of footsteps. The door opened, and Mrs. Marborough, in lace night cap and flannel robe, peered suspiciously at the girls.

"What do you want?" she asked crossly. "Why do you awaken me at such an hour?"

"Don't you remember us?" Penny said, stepping into the light. "We didn't mean to startle you."

"Startle me, fiddlesticks! I am merely annoyed at being awakened from a sound slumber."

"I'm terribly sorry," Penny apologized. "We wouldn't bother you, but we saw someone with a lantern moving about in the yard. We were afraid a burglar might try to break into the house."

Mrs. Marborough gazed carefully about the yard. "I see no light," she said stiffly.

"It's gone now," Louise admitted. "As we came up from the river, we distinctly saw it near the old wishing well. Penny and I thought that whoever it was hid behind the bushes!"

"You both imagined you saw a light," the old lady said with biting emphasis. "In any case, I am not afraid of prowlers. My doors have good bolts and I'll be more than a match for anyone who tries to get inside. Thank you for your interest in my behalf, but really, I am able to look after myself."

"I'm sorry," Penny apologized meekly.

"There, your intentions were good," Mrs. Marborough said in a more kindly tone. "Better go home now and forget it. Young girls shouldn't be abroad at such a late hour."

After the door had closed, Penny and Louise slowly retraced their way to the river's edge.

"Someday I'll learn never to pay attention to your

crazy ideas, Penny Parker," Louise said, breaking a lengthy silence.

"You saw the light, didn't you?"

"I thought so, but I'm not sure of anything now. It may have come from the main road."

"Sorry, but I disagree," replied Penny. "Oh, well, if Mrs. Marborough wishes to be robbed, I suppose it's her own affair."

Launching the dinghy, the girls spread their canvas, and sailing before what wind there was, presently reached the Parker camp. Penny's father awaited them by the boathouse and helped to haul in the craft.

The girls did not tell Mr. Parker of their little adventure, but the next day at school they discussed it at considerable length. During the night no attempt had been made by anyone to break into the Marborough house. Nevertheless, Penny was unwilling to dismiss the affair as one of her many "mistakes."

She was still thinking about the affair as she wandered into the library a few minutes before class time. Rhoda Wiegand sat at one of the tables and appeared troubled.

"Hello, Rhoda," Penny greeted as she searched for a book on the shelf. "You must have an examination coming up from the way you are frowning!"

"Am I?" the older girl asked, smiling. "I was thinking hard. The truth is, I am rather puzzled."

"I like puzzles, Rhoda. If you have a knotty problem, why not test it on me?"

"I doubt if you can help me with this one, Penny. Do you remember those two Texas men I told you about?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't trust them," Rhoda said briefly. "Mr. Coaten has offered to adopt Ted and me."

"Adopt you!" Penny exclaimed. "Is that why they came here?"

"Seemingly, it is. Mr. Coaten wants to become our legal guardian. I can't understand why he should show such interest in us."

"I thought the Breens were looking after you and Ted."

"They took us in because we had no one else. We never were adopted, and the truth is, we're a financial burden."

"Is Mr. Coaten an old friend?"

"I never met him until he came to Riverview. He and his friend, Carl Addison, claim they were closely associated with my father. Neither Ted nor I ever heard Papa speak of them when he was alive."

"It does seem strange they should show such sudden interest in you," Penny commented thoughtfully. "You have no property they might wish to control?"

"Ted and I haven't a penny to our names. Papa never owned land, and what cash he had was absorbed by his last sickness."

"Then perhaps Mr. Coaten really is a friend."

"I wish I could think so, but I can't. Penny, I just

feel that he has a selfish purpose behind his apparent kindness. It worries me because I can't figure it out."

"Then of course you'll not agree to the adoption?"

"I don't want to, Penny. Ted favors it, and so does Mrs. Breen. You see, Mr. Coaten has been very generous with his money." Rhoda indicated a new dress which she wore. "He gave me this. He made Mrs. Breen accept money, and he's giving Ted things too."

"If he's really a friend of the family—"

"I'll never believe that he is," Rhoda interrupted. "Never!"

The ringing of the school bell brought the conversation to an end, but all during the morning Penny thought of what the trailer-camp girl had told her. Knowing nothing concerning the characters of the two strangers, she could not judge their motives.

Another matter caused Penny considerable annoyance. The morning paper had carried a brief item about the record stone found at the Marborough mansion. From her father she had learned that instead of delivering the rock to the museum, Jay Franklin had hauled it to his own home, offering it for sale to the highest bidder. Penny felt that Mrs. Marborough should be told what had occurred, yet neither she nor Louise were eager to visit Rose Acres again.

"After last night I've had enough of that place," Louise declared as they discussed the matter. "Mrs. Marborough was very rude to us."

"Even so, we should tell her what Jay Franklin has

done," Penny insisted. "Let's go right after school."

"I can't," Louise declined. "I've planned a shopping tour."

"Then, immediately after dinner," Penny persisted. "I'll stop by for you in the car."

As it developed, various duties kept both girls so busy that it was dusk before they actually drove toward Rose Acres. Louise protested that, considering what had occurred the previous night, it was much too late to call on the widow.

"Mrs. Marborough surely won't be abed before eight o'clock," Penny answered carelessly. "If the house should be dark, we can drive away without disturbing her." Louise made another protest, but knew that as usual Penny would get her way.

A few minutes later the automobile swung around a bend. Directly ahead loomed the old colonial mansion, its windows without lights.

"We may as well turn back," Louise observed.

Penny slackened speed, gazing toward the unkempt grounds.

"Louise!" she exclaimed tensely. "There it is again! The light!"

"Where?" Louise demanded in disbelief. "I don't see it."

As she spoke, the car passed beyond a tall clump of azalea bushes bordering the property. Through its branches both girls saw a light which appeared to be motionless.

"It's a lantern covered with a cloth to prevent a bright glow!" Louise discerned.

"And it's close to the wishing well!" Penny added in a thrilled voice. "Lou, there's something queer going on at this place. Let's find out about it!"

"How?" Louise asked, forgetting that she had decided to have nothing more to do with her chum's "ideas."

"Let's drive past the house and park up the road," Penny proposed with a delighted chuckle. "Then we'll steal back afoot and see what we can see!"

CHAPTER

10

BENEATH THE FLAGSTONES

LOUISE OFFERED no serious objection to Penny's proposal, for she too was curious to learn who might be prowling about the Marborough yard. Driving on down the road for a considerable distance, they parked the car just off the pavement and walked back to the estate. A high hedge bounded the front side of the Marborough property, but they were able to peer through the scanty foliage into the yard.

"It will be just our luck that the light has disappeared," Penny muttered. "I don't see it anywhere."

"I do!" Louise whispered excitedly. "Look over there by the wishing well."

In the darkness, both girls could see the faint glow of a covered lantern which had been deposited on the ground. A shadowy figure was bending over, examining some object on the ground.

"Can you tell who it is?" Penny murmured.

"Not from here. Dare we move closer?"

"Let's risk it," Penny said, and led the way through the open gateway.

Taking the precaution to keep tall bushes between themselves and the wishing well, the girls quietly stole closer. Soon they were near enough to distinguish that someone in dark clothing was kneeling on the ground, face turned away from them. Apparently the person was trying to lift one of the flagstones which formed a circular base about the covered well.

"Who can he be?" Penny whispered, pausing. "And what is he doing?"

At that moment the figure straightened, and the lantern was lifted from the ground.

"It's a *she*, not a he!" Louise observed in an undertone.

"Mrs. Marborough!"

"It looks like her from here," Louise nodded. "But what can she be doing at the well?"

Completely mystified, the girls remained motionless, watching. Mrs. Marborough raised one of the flagstones and peered beneath it.

"She's searching for something," Penny whispered. "Probably she works after dark so she won't be observed."

It was evident to both girls that the moving light which had attracted their attention the previous night had, undoubtedly, been Mrs. Marborough's lantern.

Although they now could understand the old lady's irritation at their intrusion, her actions mystified them. As they continued to watch, she pried up one stone after another, frequently resting from her labors.

"We might offer to help her," Louise proposed half-seriously.

"If we show ourselves now she'll order us never to return," Penny replied. "We want to find out what this is all about."

During the next ten minutes the girls huddled behind the friendly bush. At the end of that period, Mrs. Marborough gathered together her tools, and went wearily into the house.

"Obviously she didn't find what she was after," Penny said, coming from behind the shelter. "What do you suppose it can be?"

"Buried treasure, perhaps."

"Or possibly the family silverware hidden during the Civil War," Penny chuckled. "I'm afraid not. Mrs. Marborough lived at Rose Acres all her early years. If there had been anything valuable buried, wouldn't she have done her searching long ago?"

"If that's a question, I can't answer it," sighed Louise. "What's our next move? Home?"

"I should say not! Let's inspect the wishing well."

Penny started forward, taking pains to avoid a patch of light which came from the lower windows of the Marborough house. Even in the semi-darkness the

girls were able to see that many flagstones about the well had been removed and fitted again into place.

"Just for luck I shall make a wish!" Penny announced unexpectedly, lowering the bucket into the pit.

"What will it be this time?" Louise inquired, slightly amused.

Penny drank deeply of the cool, sweet water, and tossed a token into the well.

"I wish that Rose Acres would give us a whopping big mystery!" she said gaily. "Lou, why did Mrs. Marborough return to Riverview after being away so many years?"

"This is her ancestral home."

"True, but didn't she tell us that whether or not she remains here depends upon certain conditions? Lou, she must have had a very special reason for coming, and it may be connected with this wishing well! We ought to find out about it!"

"Why?"

"Why?" Penny fairly wailed. "Oh, Lou, at times you're the most exasperating person. Here we are face to face with something baffling, and you wonder why we should interest ourselves in it!"

"I like mystery as well as you, but you know Mrs. Marborough won't care to have us interfere in her private affairs."

"Probably not," Penny conceded. "Oh, well, we can forget all about it if that's the way you feel."

"How could we learn anything without provoking Mrs. Marborough?"

"I know of no way," Penny admitted. "In fact, she'll probably be irritated when I rap on her door again."

Louise followed her chum down the path toward the house.

"Ought we bother Mrs. Marborough now?" she asked in mild protest. "She may think we have been spying on her."

"Which of course we never would consider doing," Penny chuckled.

Paying no heed to Louise, she boldly clomped across the veranda and knocked on the door. The girls did not have long to wait. In a moment Mrs. Marborough appeared, looking decidedly flustered and nervous.

"Who is it?" she asked sharply, and then recognized the girls. "Oh, I see!"

"Mrs. Marborough, do excuse us," Penny began hastily. "I've learned something which I feel sure you'll wish to hear."

"You've seen another light in the yard perhaps?" the old lady inquired, her voice slightly mocking.

Penny glanced at Louise, uncertain what to say in reply.

"There has been no one in my yard either last night or this evening," Mrs. Marborough resumed tartly. "I appreciate your interest in my welfare, but I can only repeat that I am quite capable of looking after myself."

"We came to tell you about that big rock which we discovered on the hillside," Penny interposed. "Do you care to hear what Jay Franklin did?"

Despite herself, Mrs. Marborough was interested. She hesitated, and then came outside, carefully closing the door behind her. The peculiar action was not lost upon the girls.

"It's quite chilly out tonight," Penny said significantly. "Perhaps it would be better to step inside."

"I don't mind a little fresh air," Mrs. Marborough replied. "Now what is it that you wish to tell me?"

Feeling far from comfortable, Penny explained how Jay Franklin had kept the big rock as his own property and was endeavoring to sell it to the museum at a handsome profit.

"But he told me he would give the stone to the institution!" Mrs. Marborough exclaimed indignantly. "Will you see Mr. Franklin tomorrow?"

"I can," Penny nodded.

"Then if you do, ask him to come here and see me."

As if the matter were completely settled, Mrs. Marborough started to reënter the house. She did not invite the girls to accompany her. However, sensing that they were puzzled by her lack of hospitality she said apologetically:

"I would invite you in only the house isn't fixed up yet. After everything is cleaned and straightened, you both must come to tea."

Without giving the girls an opportunity to say that

they shouldn't mind a disorderly house, she gently closed the door.

"Well, at least Mrs. Marborough didn't slam it in our faces this time," Penny remarked cheerfully. "Lou, we're making progress!"

"Progress toward what?" Louise demanded.

"I'm not sure yet," Penny laughed as they started for their car. "All the same, I have a feeling that we're on our way!"

CHAPTER

11

JAY FRANKLIN'S TRICKERY

"MORNING, DAD," Penny greeted her father as she slid into a vacant chair at the breakfast table. "What's news and why?"

"No news." Mr. Parker lowered his paper, and folding it, devoted himself to a plate of bacon and eggs.

"Just fourteen pages of well-set type, I suppose. Isn't there anything about that big stone Lou and I found at the Marborough place?"

"Not a line. I told you the *Star* would play that yarn down."

"Why are you so convinced it's all a hoax?" Penny demanded, reaching across the table for the coffee percolator.

"Must I give you a diagram?" the publisher asked wearily. "After you've been in the newspaper business as long as I have, you don't need reasons. You sense things."

"Just like a bloodhound!" Penny teased. "How about the other papers? Aren't they carrying the story either?"

"They are," Mr. Parker admitted a bit grimly. "The *News* used a half page of pictures today and went for the story in a big way."

"I may subscribe to a rival paper just to keep posted on the latest developments," Penny teased.

"Nothing really new has come out. Jay Franklin is trying to sell the Marborough stone to the museum at a fancy price, and the institution officials are seriously considering his proposition."

"Then, in their opinion the stone is an authentic one?"

"Experts have been known to be wrong," Mr. Parker insisted. "I claim no knowledge of ancient writing, but I do have common sense. For the time being, at least, I shall continue to play down the story."

Penny finished breakfast, and before starting to school, telephoned Jay Franklin. Relaying Mrs. Marborough's message, she requested him to visit the old lady as soon as it was convenient. Somewhat to her surprise he promised that he would call at Rose Acres that afternoon.

During school, Penny kept thinking about the Marborough stone and her father's theory that the writing and symbols it bore were fakes. It occurred to her that Truman Crocker's opinion might be interesting

for the old man had worked with rocks his entire life.

"Let's hike out to his shack this afternoon," she impulsively proposed to Louise Sidell.

"All right," her chum agreed. "Why not invite Rhoda too? She might enjoy accompanying us."

Upon being approached, the trailer camp girl immediately accepted the invitation. Since the last meeting of the Palette Club nearly all of the students had been very kind to her, but she seemed rather indifferent to everyone save Louise and Penny.

As the three girls trudged along the dusty road enroute to the river shack, Rhoda spoke of Mr. Coaten and his friend who still remained in Riverview.

"They've taken a room at the Riverview Hotel," she told Penny and Louise. "Perhaps I am too suspicious, but I don't trust them. Mr. Coaten never would seem like a father to me."

"Is he married?" Louise questioned curiously.

"His wife remained in Dallas. The Coatens have two children of their own. I can't understand why they should be so eager to adopt two more—penniless at that."

"What will you do?" Louise inquired.

"I don't know. Ted and I are deadlocked. He favors the adoption, but I am against it."

"I think you are wise to be cautious—and my advice is 'stand firm,'" Penny declared promptly. "The Breens were kind enough to take you in when you had no friends, so why not stay on with them?"

"That's the trouble," Rhoda confessed. "They haven't much money, you know, and Mr. Coaten has offered to give them a hundred dollars if they make no objection to the adoption."

"Buying them off?" Penny commented.

"In a way, yes. But why should Mr. Coaten be so interested in adopting Ted and me? We'll certainly be a financial liability."

The problem was such a perplexing one that neither Penny nor Louise could offer any convincing answer. Considering everything Rhoda had told them it appeared that Mr. Coaten must be motivated entirely by generosity. Yet, it seemed odd that if he were an old family friend he had not interested himself in their case at the time of Mr. Wiegand's death.

Choosing a trail which led along the river, the girls soon came to Truman Crocker's shack. It was a long, one-story frame building which served the dual purpose of dwelling and shop. The door of the workroom stood ajar, and the stonecutter could be seen grinding a granite block.

"Good afternoon," Penny said in a loud voice to make herself heard.

The stonecutter jumped from surprise and switched off a running motor.

"You scared me out of a year's growth," he grinned. "Well, what can I do for you?"

"Not much of anything," Penny responded, glancing with interest about the cluttered workshop. "We

were just out for a walk and thought we would stop in for a few minutes."

Her attention drawn to a large rock which had been covered with wet sacking, she crossed the room to examine it. Iron filings had been sprinkled on the covering, and she knew that they must have a special purpose.

"What is this for?" she inquired curiously.

"Oh, I'm removing discoloration from a stone," Mr. Crocker answered. "Don't touch the sacking. Leave it alone."

"What do you do with the rock after you finish working on it?" Louise asked, crossing the room to stand beside Penny.

"I sell it," Mr. Crocker returned briefly. "I have work to do, and I'm waiting to get at it."

"Oh, we didn't mean to interrupt you," Penny apologized. "The truth is, we came here to ask you about that stone you hauled for Jay Franklin. Do you think the writing on it is genuine?"

"Sure it is. Anyone who knows anything about stones could tell it had been lying in the ground for years."

"The aging couldn't have been faked?"

"Say, what is this?" Crocker demanded, scowling. "What are you trying to get at?"

"My father, who publishes the *Star*, believes that someone may be perpetrating a hoax."

"A what?" Crocker asked, puzzled by the word.

"A joke. He thinks that some *clever* person may have faked the writing on the two stones."

"Well, I didn't have nothing to do with it," Truman Crocker declared, his tone unpleasant. "I hauled the rock for Jay Franklin and that's all I know about it. Now go away and don't pester me."

"We're the same as absent right now," Penny laughed, retreating to the doorway. "Thanks for your splendid cooperation."

"What's that?"

"Never mind, you wouldn't understand," Penny replied. "Goodbye."

A safe distance from the shack, the three girls expressed their opinion of the old stonecutter's manners.

"He acted as if we were suspicious of him," Louise declared. "Such a simple fellow!"

"It never once entered my head that Crocker could have any connection with the hoax, assuming that the writing isn't genuine," Penny said. "But now that I think of it, why wouldn't he be a logical person to do such a trick?"

"He's far too stupid," Louise maintained. "Why, I doubt that he ever went through eighth grade in school. Likely he never even heard of Elizabethan writing."

"All true," Penny conceded, "but couldn't someone have employed him? If he were told to carve a rock

in such and such a manner, I'm sure he could carry out instructions perfectly. He knows more about such work than anyone in this community."

"Oh, Penny, you're quite hopeless!" Louise laughed. "Just let anyone rebuff you, and immediately you try to pin a crime on him!"

"I'm not accusing Truman Crocker of anything—at least not yet. All the same, those two stones were found quite close to his shack. The Gleason farm isn't more than three-quarters of a mile away."

"Why should Mr. Crocker be interested in playing such a joke?" Rhoda inquired dubiously. "Or for that matter, any other person?"

"I can't figure it out," Penny acknowledged. "If the stones are fakes, one would judge them to be the creation of a rather brilliant practical joker."

"Are you sure you didn't do it yourself?" Louise asked teasingly. "After all, you were the one who found the second stone, so that throws suspicion on you!"

Penny allowed the subject to die. With a quick change of interest, she suggested to her companions that they return to Riverview by way of the Marborough place.

"Don't you think we're showing ourselves there too frequently," Louise protested mildly. "There's such a thing as wearing out one's welcome."

"Oh, we needn't try to break into the house."

Penny grinned. "But if we don't go there, we'll never learn any more about the mystery."

Louise and Rhoda were not particularly eager to climb the hill. However, to oblige Penny they offered no objection to her proposal.

Approaching the Marborough property five minutes later, the girls were startled to hear loud, angry voices. The sound came from the direction of the old wishing well.

"Someone is having a fearful argument!" Penny declared, quickening her step.

As the three friends emerged into the clearing they saw Mrs. Marborough and Jay Franklin sitting together on a garden bench. The widow was speaking in a high-pitched voice, reprimanding the caller for having misled her regarding the record stone found on her land.

"She's giving it to him right, and I'm glad!" Penny chuckled.

"Let's not go any closer," Louise murmured, holding back.

Penny stared at her chum in blank amazement. "Not go closer?" she demanded. "Why, this is why we came! I thought Mr. Franklin might be here, and I want to hear what he has to say for himself."

CHAPTER

12

NO ADMITTANCE

NEITHER LOUISE nor Rhoda approved of interfering in the argument between Mrs. Marborough and Mr. Franklin, but as usual they could not stand firm against Penny. Making considerable noise to give warning of their approach, the girls drew near the garden bench.

"Your conduct has amazed and disappointed me," they heard the old lady say in clipped words. "When I allowed you to remove the stone from my yard you promised that you would deliver it to the museum."

"I may have mentioned such a possibility, but I made no promise," Mr. Franklin replied. "You sold the rock to me. It is now mine to do with as I see fit."

"You deliberately tricked me! I am less concerned with the money than with the fact that you are trying to force the museum to pay for something which I meant them to have free."

"Mrs. Marborough, you sold the rock for two dol-

lars. Unless I am very much mistaken, that money meant more to you than you would have the townspeople believe!"

Mrs. Marborough arose from the bench, glaring at the visitor.

"Mr. Franklin, you are insulting! Leave my premises this minute and never return!"

"I'll be very happy to depart," the man retorted, smiling coldly. "I came here only because you sent for me. However, if you were inclined to take a sensible viewpoint, I might make you a business proposition."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Franklin?"

"I refer to this house here. If you're disposed to sell it I might make you an offer."

Mrs. Marborough had started toward the house, but then she paused and regarded him speculatively.

"What is your offer, Mr. Franklin?"

"I'll give you fifteen hundred for the house and grounds."

"Fifteen hundred!" the old lady exclaimed shrilly. "For a house which cost at least forty thousand to build! Aren't you being outrageously reckless?"

"Old houses are a drug on the market these days, Madam. You'll find no other buyer in Riverview, I am quite sure. In fact, I wouldn't make you such a generous offer except that I think this place might be fixed up as a tourist home."

"A tourist home!" Mrs. Marborough cried furi-

ously. "You would make this beautiful, colonial mansion into a cheap hotel! Oh, go away, and never, never show your face here again!"

"Very well, Madam," Mr. Franklin responded, still smiling. "However, I warn you that my next offer for the property will not be as generous a one."

"Generous!" Mrs. Marborough fairly screamed for she was determined to have the final word. "Your price would be robbery! You're just like your father, who was one of the worst skinflints I ever knew!"

Mr. Franklin had nothing more to say. With a shrug, he turned and strode from the yard. Mrs. Marborough gazed after him for a moment, and then sinking down on the stone bench, began to cry. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned her head and saw the three girls. Hastily, she dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

"Oh, Mrs. Marborough, don't feel badly," Penny said quickly. "We heard what he said to you. Mr. Franklin should be ashamed of himself."

"That man doesn't affect me one way or the other," the old lady announced with a toss of the head. The girls accepted the explanation with tranquil faces although they knew very well why Mrs. Marborough had wept. Rhoda wandered to the wishing well, peering down into the crystal-clear water.

"Do you know, I'm tempted to make another wish," she remarked. "Would it be very selfish of me?"

"Selfish?" Louise inquired, puzzled.

"The last one came true. I shouldn't expect too much."

"Do make your wish, Rhoda," urged Penny, "but don't anticipate quick action. I'm still waiting for mine to come true."

Rhoda drew a bucket of water from the well, and filling the dipper which always hung on a nail of the wooden roof, drank deeply.

"I wish," she said soberly, "I wish that Ted might find a job. If he could get work, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to accept charity from Mr. Coaten or anyone!"

Rhoda's wish, so earnestly spoken, slightly embarrassed the others, for it served to remind them of the girl's poverty.

"Now you make one, Penny," Louise urged to cover an awkward silence.

"I can't think of anything I want," Penny answered.

"Well, I can!" Mrs. Marborough announced unexpectedly. "In all the years of my life I've never made a wish at this well, but now I shall!"

To the delight of the girls, she reached for the bucket of water. With a grim face she slammed the entire contents back into the well.

"Just a little token, O wishing well," she muttered. "My desire is a most worthy one. All I ask is that Jay Franklin be given his come-uppance!"

"We'll all second that wish!" Penny added gaily.

"There!" Mrs. Marborough declared, rather pleased

with herself. "That makes me feel better. Now I'll forget that man and go about my business."

"I think it was selfish of him to take the attitude he did about the stone," Penny said, wishing to keep an entertaining topic alive.

Mrs. Marborough seemed to have lost all interest in the subject. Gathering her long skirts about her, she started for the house. Midway up the flagstone path she paused to say:

"There's a tree of nice summer apples out yonder by the back fence. Pick all you like and take some home if you care for them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Marborough," Louise responded politely.

After the door had closed behind the old lady, the girls did not immediately leave the vicinity of the wishing well.

"She means to be kind," Louise commented, drawing figures in the dirt with her shoe. "But isn't it funny she never invites us into the house?"

"It's downright mysterious," Penny added. "You notice Jay Franklin didn't get in there either!"

"Why does she act that way?" Rhoda asked in perplexity.

"Penny thinks she's trying to keep folks from discovering something," explained Louise. "The old lady is queer in other ways, too."

Thoroughly enjoying the tale, the girls told Rhoda how they had observed Mrs. Marborough removing

the flagstones surrounding the base of the wishing well.

"There's been more digging!" Penny suddenly cried, springing up from the bench. "See!"

Excitedly she pointed to a place where additional flagstones had been lifted and carelessly replaced.

"Mrs. Marborough must have been at work again!" Louise agreed. "What does she expect to find?"

"Fishing worms, perhaps," Rhoda suggested with a smile. "Under the flagstones would be a good place."

"Mrs. Marborough never would go fishing," Louise answered. "Sometimes I wonder if she's entirely right in her mind. It just isn't normal to go around digging on your own property after night."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Marborough knows what she is about," Penny declared. "She's looking for something which is hidden!"

"But what can it be?" Louise speculated. "Nothing she does seems to make sense."

"She's one of the most interesting characters I've met in many a day," Penny said warmly. "I like her better all the time."

"How about those apples?" Rhoda suggested, changing the subject. "I'm sure Mrs. Breen could use some of them."

As the girls started toward the gnarled old tree, a battered automobile drew up in front of the house. A man who was dressed in coat and trousers taken from two separate suits alighted and came briskly up the walk.

"Who is he?" Louise whispered curiously.

"Never saw him before," Penny admitted. "He looks almost like a tramp."

"Or an old clothes man," Rhoda added with a laugh.

Observing the girls, the man doffed his battered derby.

"Is this where Mrs. Marborough lives?" he asked.

"Yes, she is inside," Louise replied.

Bowing again, the man presented himself at the front door, hammering it loudly with the brass knocker.

"Mrs. Marborough will make short work of him," Penny laughed. "She's so friendly to visitors!"

Before the girls could walk on to the apple tree, Mrs. Marborough opened the door.

"Mr. Butterworth?" she asked, without waiting for the man to speak.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Come in," invited Mrs. Marborough, her voice impersonal.

The caller stepped across the threshold and the door swung shut.

"Did you see that?" Louise whispered, stunned by the ease with which the man had gained admittance.

"I certainly did!" Penny murmured. "That fellow —whoever he is—has accomplished something that even Riverview's society ladies couldn't achieve! Maybe I was puzzled before, but now, let me tell you, I'm completely tied in a knot!"

CHAPTER

13

A SILKEN LADDER

AS PENNY approached the school grounds the following morning, she heard her name called. A moment later, Rhoda Wiegand, breathless from running, caught up with her.

"Penny, the most wonderful thing has happened!" she exclaimed.

"Your Texas friends have left town?" the other guessed.

Rhoda shook her head. "Unfortunately, it's not quite that wonderful. They're still here. This news is about my brother, Ted. He has a job!"

"Why, that's splendid. Exactly what you wished for yesterday afternoon at the well."

"Penny, doesn't it seem strange?" Rhoda asked soberly. "This makes twice my wish has come true. How do you account for it?"

"I suppose your brother could have obtained the

job through accident," Penny answered. "That would be the logical explanation."

"But it all came about in such an unusual way. Judge Harlan saw Ted on the street and liked his appearance. So he sent a note to the Camp asking if he would work as a typist in his office."

"Ted is accepting?"

"Oh, yes. The pay is splendid for that sort of work. Besides, it will give him a chance to study law, which is his life ambition. Oh, Penny, you can't know how happy I am about it!"

At the mid-morning recess, Penny reported the conversation to Louise. Both girls were pleased that Ted Wiegand had obtained employment, but it did seem peculiar to them that the judge would go to such lengths to gain the services of a young man of questionable character.

"Perhaps he wants to help him," Louise speculated. "Ted is at the critical point of his life now. He could develop into a very fine person or just the opposite."

"It's charity, of course. But who put the judge up to it?"

"Mrs. Marborough heard Rhoda express her wish."

"Yes, she did," Penny agreed, "but I don't think she paid much attention. She was too angry at Jay Franklin. Besides, Mrs. Marborough doesn't have a reputation for doing kind deeds."

"If you rule her out, there's nothing left but the old wishing well," Louise laughed.

"I might be tempted to believe it has unusual powers if ever it would do anything for me," grumbled Penny. "Not a single one of my wishes has been granted."

"A mystery seems to be developing at Rose Acres," Louise reminded her.

"I've not learned anything new since I made my wish. Mrs. Marborough hasn't decided to cooperate with the Pilgrimage Committee either."

The Festival Week program which so interested Penny had been set for the twentieth of the month and the days immediately following. Gardens were expected to be at their height at that time, and the owners of seven fairly old houses had agreed to open their doors to the public. Both Penny and Louise had helped sell tickets for the motor pilgrimage, but sales resistance was becoming increasingly difficult to overcome.

"The affair may be a big flop," Penny remarked to her chum. "No one wants to pay a dollar to see a house which isn't particularly interesting. Now Rose Acres would draw customers. The women of Riverview are simply torn with curiosity to get in there."

"I don't believe Mrs. Marborough ever will change her mind."

"Neither do I," Penny agreed gloomily.

Two days elapsed during which nothing happened, according to the viewpoint of the girls. From Rhoda they learned that Ted was well established in his new job, and that Mr. Coaten seemed displeased about it.

Mr. Parker reported that Jay Franklin had made progress in his efforts to sell the Marborough stone to the Riverview Museum. Other than that, there was no news, no developments of interest.

"Louise, let's visit Truman Crocker again," Penny proposed on Saturday afternoon when time hung heavily.

"What good would it do?" Louise demurred. "You know very well he doesn't like to have us around."

"He acted suspicious of us, which made me suspicious of him. I've been thinking, Lou—if the writing on those two stones were faked, it must have been done with a chisel—one which would leave a characteristic mark. Every tool is slightly different, you know."

"All of which leads you to conclude—?"

"That if Truman Crocker did the faking he would have a tool in his workshop that would make grooves similar to those on the stones. An expert might compare them and tell."

"Do we consider ourselves experts?"

"Of course not," Penny said impatiently. "But if I could get the right tool, I could turn it over to someone who knows about such things."

"So you propose to go out to the shack today and appropriate a tool?"

"I'll buy it from Mr. Crocker. Perhaps I can convince him I want to chisel a tombstone for myself or something of the sort!"

"I used to think you were just plain crazy, Penny Parker," Louise declared sadly. "Lately you've reached the stage where adjectives are too weak to describe you!"

A half hour later found the two girls at the Crocker shack. The door of the workshop stood open, but as Penny and Louise peered inside, they saw no sign of the old stonecutter. A number of tools lay on a bench where Crocker had been working, and with no hesitation Penny examined them.

"Here is a chisel," she said in satisfaction. "It seems to be the only one around too. Just what I need!"

"Penny, you wouldn't dare take it!"

"In my official capacity as a detective—yes. I'll leave more than enough money to pay for it. Then after I've had it examined by an expert, I'll return it to Mr. Crocker."

"O Mystery, what crimes are committed in thy name," Louise warbled. "If you land in jail, my dear Penny, don't expect me to share your cell cot."

"I'll take all the responsibility."

Selecting a bill from her purse, Penny laid it in a conspicuous place on the workbench.

"There, that should buy three or four chisels," she declared. "Now let's leave here before Truman Crocker arrives."

Emerging from the shop, Penny and Louise were surprised to see dark storm clouds scudding overhead. The sun had been completely blotted out and occa-

sional flashes of lightning brightened a gray sky.

"It's going to rain before we can get to Riverview," Louise declared uneasily. "We'll be drenched."

"Why not go by way of Mrs. Marborough's place?" Penny proposed. "Then if the rain does overtake us, we can dodge into the summer house until the shower passes over."

Hastening toward the hillside trail, the girls observed that the river level was higher than when last they had seen it. Muddy water lapped almost at the doorstep of Truman Crocker's shack. A rowboat tied to a half submerged dock nearby swung restlessly on its long rope.

"I should be afraid to live so close to the river," Louise remarked. "If the water comes only a few feet higher, Crocker's place will sail South."

"The river control system is supposed to take care of everything," Penny answered carelessly. "Dad says he doesn't place much faith in it himself—not if it's ever put to a severe test."

Before the girls had gone far, a few drops of rain splattered down. Anticipating a deluge, they ran for the dilapidated summer house which stood at the rear edge of Mrs. Marborough's property. Completely winded, they sank down on a dusty wooden bench to recapture their breath.

"The clouds are rolling eastward," Louise remarked, scanning the sky. "It may not rain much after all."

"Lou!" Penny said in a startled voice.

She was gazing toward the old wishing well at a dark figure which could be seen bending far over the yawning hole.

"What is it?" Louise inquired, turning in surprise.

"Look over there!" Penny directed. "Mrs. Marborough is doing something at the well. Is she trying to repair it or what?"

"She's examining the inside!" Louise exclaimed. "Why, if she's not careful, she may fall. We ought to warn her—"

"Mrs. Marborough knows what she is about, Lou. Let's just watch."

From a distance it was not possible to tell exactly what the old lady was doing. So far as the girls could discern she was tapping the inside stones of the well with a hammer.

"She's trying to discover if any of them are loose!" Penny whispered excitedly. "Louise, I'm sure of it now! Something of great value is hidden in or near the wishing well, and Mrs. Marborough came back to Riverview to find it!"

"What could it be?"

"I haven't an idea."

"If there's something hidden in or around the well, why doesn't she have a workman make a thorough search?"

"Probably because she doesn't want folks to suspect

what she is about, Lou. That may explain why she works at night and on very dark, gloomy days such as today. She doesn't wish to be seen."

"Mrs. Marborough searches in such obvious places," Louise said after a moment. "If anything really is hidden it might be deep down in the well. She never will find it in that case."

"We might help her," Penny suggested impulsively.

"You know she would resent our interference."

"She probably would if we tell her what we intend to do."

Louise gazed speculatively at her chum, realizing that Penny had some plan in mind. She waited expectantly, and then as the other did not speak, inquired:

"Just what scheme are you hatching now?"

"You gave me the idea yourself," Penny chuckled. "The logical place to search is deep down inside the well. I'm sure the water can't be more than a few feet deep."

"So you want me to dive in and drown myself?" Louise joked. "Thank you, but I prefer to restrict my aquatic exercise to swimming pools!"

"Remember that silk ladder I acquired when I helped police capture Al Gepper and his slippery pals?" Penny demanded, paying no heed to the teasing.

"I do," Louise nodded. "It was made of braided

silk strands by a Chinese curio man, and had two iron hooks to claw into the wood of window ledges."

"Those same hooks will fit very nicely over the side of the wishing well. I've been waiting for a chance to use that ladder, and here it is!"

"Penny! You actually have the courage to climb down into a well?"

"Why not?" Penny laughed. "But it must be tonight while my enthusiasm is bubbling. Meet me at nine o'clock and bring a good flashlight."

Louise could only stare. "You're actually serious!"

"Indeed I am," Penny replied gaily. "Everything is settled. Now let's slip away from here before Mrs. Marborough sees us."

CHAPTER

14

NIGHT ADVENTURE

THE NIGHT, dark and misty, was entirely suitable for the purpose to which the two girls had dedicated it. Dinner over, Penny obtained the unique silken ladder from an attic trunk. Compressing it into a small brief-case, she sauntered through the living room.

"Aren't you becoming quite studious of late?" Mr. Parker inquired, noting the brief-case tucked under her arm. "Off to the library again?"

"Over to Louise's house," Penny corrected vaguely. "From that point on there's no guarantee."

"You'll be home early?"

"I hope so," Penny answered earnestly. "If for any reason I fail to appear, don't search in any of the obvious places."

Leaving her father to ponder over the remark, she hastily quitted the house. A clock chimed nine o'clock as she reached the Sidell house, and a moment later her chum joined her in the yard.

"I had trouble getting away," Louise reported. "Mother asked a thousand questions."

"Did you bring the flashlight?"

"Yes, here it is. My, but it's a dark night!"

"All the better for our purpose," Penny said cheerfully.

A single light burned in the kitchen window of the Marborough house as the girls presently approached it. The garden was shrouded in damp, wispy mist and the unkempt grounds never had appeared more desolate.

"Penny, must we go through with this?" Louise asked, rapidly losing enthusiasm for the venture.

"I'll admit the idea doesn't look quite as attractive as it did this afternoon," her chum replied. "All the same, I'm going through with it!"

"What can you hope to find down in that well?"

Penny did not answer. Walking ahead of Louise, she noiselessly crossed the yard to the old wishing well. Flashing her light into the circular interior, her courage nearly failed her. However, she gave no indication of it to her companion.

"Better be careful of that light," Louise warned. "That is, unless you want Mrs. Marborough to come out and catch us."

Penny switched off the flashlight and thereafter worked in darkness. Taking the silken ladder from its case, she fastened the two iron hooks over the stone ledge. Next, she lowered the ladder into the well,

listening until she heard a faint splash in the water below.

"Now you stay here and keep watch," she instructed briskly. "I'll be down and back again before you know it!"

"The ladder may break," Louise said pessimistically, seating herself on the stone ledge of the well. "Silk deteriorates with age, and those braided strands never did look strong."

"They once held one of Riverview's most notorious apartment-house burglars," Penny returned with forced cheerfulness. She climbed over the ledge, gazing down into the dark well. "It's safe enough—I hope."

"In case you slip and fall, just what am I to do?"

"That's your problem," Penny chuckled. "Now hand me the flashlight. I'm on my way."

Despite their banter, both girls were tense and worried. By daylight, a descent into the well had seemed to Penny an amusing stunt; but now as she cautiously descended into the damp, circular pit, she felt that for once in her life she had ventured too far.

"What do you see?" Louise called softly from above. "Anything?"

Reminded of the work before her, Penny clung with one hand to the swaying ladder, while with the other she directed the flashlight beam about the circular walls. The sides were cracked in many places and covered with a slimy green moss.

"What do you see, Penny?" Louise called again. "Are any of the bricks loose?"

"Not that I can discover," Penny answered, and her voice echoed weirdly. Intrigued by the sound she tried an experimental yodel. "Why, it's just like a cave scene on the radio!"

"In case you've forgotten, you're in a well," Louise said severely. "Furthermore, if you don't work fast, Mrs. Marborough will come out here!"

"I have to have a little relaxation," Penny grumbled.

Descending deeper into the well, she resumed her task of examining the walls. There were no loose bricks, nothing to indicate that anything ever had been hidden in the cavern. Reaching the last rung without realizing it, she stepped not into space, but water.

Surprisingly her foot struck a solid foundation.

Hastily pulling herself back on the ladder, Penny shouted the information to her chum.

"Lou, the water isn't more than a foot and a half deep! There's an old boot or something of the sort floating around. You don't catch me drinking any more of this water. No sir!"

There was no reply from above.

"Louise!" Penny called, flashing her light upward.

"Quiet!" came the whispered response. "I think someone is coming!"

"Mrs. Marborough?" Penny gasped, thoroughly alarmed.

"No! Two men! They're turning in at the gate!"

Penny began to climb the silken ladder with frantic haste.

"You never can get out without them seeing you!" Louise hissed. "I'm ducking out!"

"Don't you dare!"

"They'll see me if I don't. Stay where you are Penny, and I'll come back after they go. Oh, the ladder! It's sure to give you away!"

In the emergency, Penny's mind worked with rapidity. Lowering herself into the well several rungs, she deliberately stepped into the water. To her relief it came just below her knees.

"Quick! Pull up the ladder!" she instructed.

The two men were so close that Louise dared not obey. Instead she loosed the iron hooks and dropped the ladder into the well. Penny barely was able to catch it and prevent a loud splash.

"Of all the tricks—" she muttered, but Louise did not hear. She had fled into a clump of bushes.

Penny huddled against the slimy wall, listening intently. Thinking that she heard footsteps, she switched out the flashlight.

"This is the place all right," a masculine voice said. "Wonder if the old lady is at home?"

"There's a light showing."

The voices faded away, and Penny drew a deep sigh of relief. Impatiently she waited for Louise to come to her aid. After several minutes she realized why her chum delayed, for she again heard voices.

"The old lady must be inside the house. Funny she wouldn't come to the door. They say she's a queer one though."

To Penny's discomfort, the two men paused by the wishing well.

"Want a drink?" she heard one ask.

The voices seemed faintly familiar to Penny and suddenly it dawned upon her that the two men were Mr. Coaten and his Texas friend. However, she could think of no reason why they should call upon Mrs. Marborough. Her reflection came to an abrupt end, as the well bucket splashed into the water beside her.

Suppressing a giggle, she groped for the old boot which floated nearby. Dropping it into the bucket, she watched as it was raised to the surface. A moment later she heard an exclamation of wrath from above.

"See what I've drawn up!" one of the men muttered. "These old wells must be filled with filth!"

Penny hoped that the strangers would immediately depart, but instead they loitered by the well, talking.

"We've been wasting entirely too much time in this," remarked the man whom she took to be Mr. Coaten. "Suppose we were to offer Ted a hundred dollars to sign the paper. Would he do it?"

"I think he might, but the girl is the one who'll make trouble. She's shrewd."

"We'll get around her somehow," the other said gruffly. "This thing can't drag on forever. I have work waiting for me in Texas."

The voices gradually died away and Penny heard no more. However, from the snatch of conversation, she was convinced that Rhoda's suspicions regarding the Texas strangers had been well founded. But what had brought the two men to Riverview?

"If Rhoda or Ted own property, I could understand why it would be desirable to adopt them," she thought. "As it is, the thing doesn't make sense."

To keep from freezing, Penny gingerly waded around and around in the well. It seemed ages before Louise thrust her head over the ledge and called softly:

"Are you still there, pet?"

"I'm frozen into one big icicle!" Penny retorted. "Get me out of here."

Instructing her chum to lower the bucket, Penny fastened the silken ladder to the handle. Louise hauled it up, and again hooked the irons to the ledge of the well.

Stiffly, Penny climbed toward the surface. She had nearly reached the top when the beam of light chanced to play across a section of brick which hitherto had escaped her notice. Halting, she traced with her finger a rectangular pattern on the wall.

"That's not an ordinary crack!" she thought. "It might be an old opening which has been bricked up!"

"Are you coming?" Louise called impatiently.

"I am," said Penny, emerging from the well. "And don't you dare say that this night has been a failure. I've just made a most astounding discovery!"

CHAPTER

15

OLD BOTTLES

PENNY'S STARTLING appearance rather than her words made the deepest impression upon Louise. The girl's shoes and stockings were wet, her clothing was smeared with green slime, and strings of moss clung to her hair.

"You look like Father Neptune emerging from the briny deep," she chuckled.

"I'm freezing to death," Penny chattered. "Come on, we're going home!"

Louise hauled up the silken ladder from the well. Squeezing out the water, she compressed it into the carrying case.

"What were you saying about a discovery?" she inquired belatedly.

"Oh, nothing of consequence," Penny answered, pounding her hands together to restore circulation. "Merely an opening in the side of the well. It probably leads into a tunnel."

"Penny! Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything except that I'm going home!" Penny replied crossly.

She started across the lawn with her chum hurrying after her.

"Oh, Penny, I'm terribly sorry," Louise said contritely. "I know you had an awful time down in the well. But it wasn't my fault those two men arrived just when they did."

"Who were they?" Penny asked, mollified by the apology. "From their voices I took them to be Mr. Coaten and his friend."

"That's who they were. But, I can't imagine why they came to see Mrs. Marborough. Anyway, they didn't get into the house."

"Lou, I heard those men talking while I was down in the well," Penny revealed. "I'm sure they're dishonest. They want Ted and Rhoda to sign something over to them."

"But Rhoda said she and her brother have no property."

"I know," Penny frowned. "I can't make head nor tail of the situation. I'm too miserable to think about anything now."

Pausing beside a tree, she removed one of her shoes. After pouring a little water from it, she replaced it and went through a similar procedure with the other shoe.

"Please tell me what else you learned while in the

well," Louise pleaded. "Haven't I been punished enough?"

Her good humor restored, Penny grinned amiably. "To tell you the truth, Lou, I'm not sure whether I found anything or not."

"But you said—"

"I know. Just as I reached the top of the well I noticed a section of brick wall which seemed to be cracked in the exact shape of a rectangle."

"Was that all?" Louise asked in disappointment.

"I didn't even take time to examine the place. I felt so disgusted," Penny resumed. "However, I believe that if one were able to remove those loose bricks, an opening might be found behind them."

"Where something may be hidden?"

"It's possible."

"How could one remove the bricks without hiring a workman?" Louise asked after a moment.

"If they are as loose as I think they are, I might be able to get them out myself. Not tonight though."

Penny felt in no mood to discuss future possibilities or even to consider them. Already cold, the misty air added to her physical discomfort.

"Better get a hot shower and go to bed," Louise advised as they finally reached the Parker home. "We'll talk things over in the morning."

Not desiring to attract attention to herself, Penny entered the house by a side door. To her discomfiture,

Mrs. Weems, who chanced to be getting a drink in the kitchen, saw the disheveled clothing.

"Why, Penny Parker!" she exclaimed. "What have you done to yourself?"

"Nothing," Penny mumbled. "I'm just a little wet. I've been down in a well."

"There are times when your jokes don't seem at all funny," the housekeeper said sternly. "How did you ruin your clothes?"

"That's the truth, Mrs. Weems. I was down in a well and I stepped off into the water—"

"Penny, you can't expect me to believe such a tall story. Now tell me exactly what *did* happen."

"Would it seem more reasonable if I said that I stumbled and fell into a ditch?"

"I rather thought something of the sort happened," Mrs. Weems declared. "How did the accident occur?"

"It didn't," Penny maintained plaintively.

Escaping upstairs before the housekeeper could question her further, she took a hot shower and went to bed. She could hear a murmur of voices in the living room below, and knew that Mrs. Weems was discussing her "behavior" with her father.

"Sometimes grownups are so unreasonable," she sighed, snuggling into the covers. "You tell them the truth and what they really want is a nice logical whopper!"

Penny slept soundly and did not awaken until the

Sunday morning sun was high in the heavens. Sitting up in bed, she moved her arms experimentally. They were very sore and stiff. She swung her feet to the floor and groaned with pain.

"Guess I can't take it any more," she muttered. "I must be getting soft, or else it's old age sneaking up on me!"

Torturing herself with a limbering exercise, Penny dressed and went downstairs. Mrs. Weems had gone to church while Mr. Parker had submerged himself in fifty-eight pages of Sunday paper. Detouring around the living room, Penny went to the kitchen to prepare herself a belated breakfast. She was picking at the nuts of a fruit salad found in the ice box when her father appeared in the doorway.

"Penny—" he began sternly.

"Where was I last night?" she interrupted. "I've said before, and now repeat—in a well! A nice deep one with water in it."

"When you're ready to tell me the real story, I shall listen," Mr. Parker said quietly. "Until that time, I must deprive you of your weekly allowance."

"Oh, Dad!" Penny wailed. "You know I'm stony broke! I won't be able to drive my car or even buy a hot dog!"

"That is your misfortune. Mrs. Weems says I have been entirely too indulgent with you, and I am inclined to agree with her. I've seldom checked your comings or going, but in the future I shall expect you

to tell me your plans when you leave the house at night."

Having delivered his ultimatum, Mr. Parker quietly withdrew.

Penny had lost her appetite for breakfast. Feeling much abused she banged out the kitchen door into the yard. Her first act was to inspect the gasoline tanks of both Leaping Lena and the maroon car. As she had feared, the combined fuel supply did not equal three gallons.

"There's just about fifty-five miles between me and misery," she reflected grimly. "I wouldn't dare siphon gas out of Dad's car or ask for credit at a filling station either!"

Wandering around to the front porch, she sat down on the steps. One of her high school boy friends pedalled past on his bicycle, calling a cheery greeting. Penny barely responded.

Presently a milk wagon clattered to a stop in front of the house. The driver came up the walk with his rack of milk bottles. Penny eyed him speculatively.

"We have a lot of old bottles in the basement," she greeted him. "Does your company pay for them?"

"Sorry," he declined. "We use only our own stamped bottles. There's no deposit charge. Customers are expected to return them without rebate."

The driver left a quart of milk on the back doorstep of the Parker home. In walking to his wagon, he paused beside Penny, remarking:

"Maybe you could sell your old bottles to a second-hand dealer. I saw one on the next street about five minutes ago."

"Where?" Penny demanded, jumping to her feet.

"He was on Fulton Avenue when I drove past."

Thanking the driver, Penny ran as fast as her stiff limbs would permit to the next street corner. Far up the avenue she saw a battered old car of the second-hand man. Hurrying on, she reached the automobile just as its owner came from a house carrying an armful of corded newspapers.

"Excuse me," she called eagerly, "do you buy old bottles?"

The man turned toward her, doffing his derby hat.

"Good morning, Miss," he said. "I buy newspapers, old furniture, rubber tires, copper, brass, or gold, but not bottles."

Penny scarcely heard the discouraging information for she was staring at the man as if his appearance fascinated her. For a moment she could not think where she had seen him before. And then suddenly she remembered.

"Why, I saw you at Mrs. Marborough's place!" she exclaimed. "You're the one person who has been inside the house! I want you to tell me all about it."

CHAPTER

16

INSIDE THE MANSION

MR. BUTTERWORTH, the second-hand dealer, scarcely knew what to make of Penny's abrupt request.

"Tell me how the house looks inside," she requested as he remained mute. "Is it as handsome as folks say?"

"You are a friend of Mrs. Marborough?" the man inquired, cocking his head sideways as he regarded the girl.

"Of course."

"Then why do you not ask Mrs. Marborough that question?"

"Because she never invites anyone into her house," Penny explained patiently. "You're the only person to get in so far as I know. I'll venture she sold you something. Am I right?"

"Maybe so," Mr. Butterworth grinned. "My lips, they are sealed."

"Sealed?"

"I promise Mrs. Marborough I tell nothing of what I see in the house."

"Then there is something mysterious going on there!" Penny exclaimed. "Tell me, why did you go to the house?"

"Mrs. Marborough sent for me."

"But why?" Penny demanded, exasperated because she could learn nothing of importance. "Did Mrs. Marborough sell you something?"

"Maybe so, maybe not," the second-hand man answered, climbing into his overloaded car. "You ask her."

Penny watched him drive away, and then returned to her own doorstep. She was listlessly throwing acorns at a squirrel when Louise Sidell came down the street, dressed in her Sunday best.

"What's the matter, Penny?" she inquired, roving over to the porch. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Lower than the center of the earth. I've lost my reputation with Dad, my allowance, and my initiative. If I had a nickel I'd go drown myself in a coke!"

"What you need is a nice adventure," Louise said mischievously. "How about a trip out to Mrs. Marborough's tomorrow night?"

"I've had enough of wells!"

"Penny, you don't mean it!" Louise grinned. "After discovering those loose bricks, you'll just forget about them?"

"Why not?" Penny demanded wildly. "Dad won't

let me leave the house at night any more without a six thousand page report on where I am going. If I so much as mention Mrs. Marborough's well, he'll clap on a double punishment."

"You can manage it somehow," Louise declared with confidence. "I'll meet you tomorrow night about eight-thirty."

"Maybe," Penny said gloomily.

Throughout the day she tried to win favor with both Mrs. Weems and her father by doing small things to please them. When the housekeeper came home from church, dinner awaited her. Penny insisted upon doing the dishes. She straightened the kitchen, she brought her father his bedroom slippers, and refrained from turning on the radio while he was reading. The schedule was a trying one for her, but she kept it up faithfully all day Sunday and until after dinner on Monday. Then came the denouement upon which she pinned her hopes.

"Dad," she said demurely, leaning on the chair arm and stroking his hair, "with your kind permission I should like to absent myself from the house for a few minutes."

"Where do you plan to go?" he asked, trying to act stern.

Penny was prepared for the question. From her pocket she whisked a lengthy typewritten paper, handsomely decorated with a diagram.

"What's this?" Mr. Parker asked, his lips twitching slightly.

"Merely a report on my proposed movements for the next hour. At eight-thirty I hope to be at Louise's house. Eight thirty-four should find me on Adams Street, moving southward. At eight thirty-eight I pass Gulbert Park—"

"Never mind," Mr. Parker interrupted. "I see by this lengthy document that your ultimate destination is Mrs. Marborough's estate. Isn't it rather late to pay a social call?"

"Eight-thirty?"

"What does this X on the map represent?" the publisher asked, his interest shifting.

"Oh that?" smiled Penny. "Merely one of the fixtures in Mrs. Marborough's yard. Louise and I think treasure may be hidden there."

Amused by what he took to be his daughter's whimsy, Mr. Parker returned the diagram to her.

"Do I have your permission to leave the house?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, you may go," he agreed. "But mind, no late hours. And no more tall tales about falling into wells!"

Louise was waiting for Penny in the Sidell yard and the girls went as quickly as they could to the Marborough estate. The house was completely dark, leading them to believe that the widow might have absented herself for the evening.

"We'll have to be especially careful," Louise warned as they approached the old wishing well. "She might return at any moment and find us."

Penny had brought the silken ladder, extra rope, a flashlight and a suit of warm coveralls which her father used when he worked on the car. Donning the bulky garment, she prepared to descend a few feet into the well.

"Do be careful," Louise said anxiously. "If you should fall you might kill yourself."

"You think of the most cheerful things," Penny muttered, climbing nimbly down the swaying ladder. "I'm not taking any chances though. I'll tie myself to the ladder with this extra piece of rope."

After she had gained the position she desired, Louise handed down the flashlight. Penny carefully inspected the brick wall.

"I believe it is an opening!" she reported jubilantly. "I really do. Here, take this flash. I can't work and hold it."

While Louise directed the beam from above, Penny tugged at the bricks. Unable to move them, she called for a tool which she had brought with her. By means of it, she easily pried one of the bricks loose. Pushing her arm through the opening, she encountered only empty space.

"It's a little tunnel I think!" she shouted to Louise. "Take this brick, and I'll try to pry out others!"

Within ten minutes Penny had handed up enough

of them to make a large pile beside the flagstones.

"Do you realize you're practically destroying Mrs. Marborough's well!" Louise said uneasily. "How will we ever explain this?"

"I can put the bricks back again," Penny assured her. "They were meant to come out. Now, the flashlight again."

Balancing herself precariously on the ladder, she directed the light through the opening she had created. A long narrow tunnel which she judged to be about five feet below the ground, extended as far as she could see.

"I'm going to try to get in there!" she called to Louise. "Toss me a life preserver if I fail!"

Calculating the space, Penny swung her feet from the ladder to the ledge. Retaining an arm hold on the ropes, she edged herself backwards into the hole.

"It's much easier than it looks," she called encouragingly to her chum. "Come on, if you want to explore."

Louise hesitated, and then daringly climbed down into the well. Penny helped her from the ladder into the tunnel.

"Where do you suppose this leads?" Louise gasped.

"Maybe to the house," Penny speculated. "I know lots of these old places had escapes made so that in time of war or Indian attacks, the householders could get away. Never heard of a tunnel opening into a well though!"

The bricked passageway was so low that for the first twelve feet the girls were forced to crawl on hands and knees. Gradually, the tunnel deepened until they were able to walk in a stooped position.

"We're coming to the end of it," Penny presently announced.

Directly in front of her was a heavy door which showed the effects of age. It did not move easily, but together, the girls were able to swing it open.

"Where in the world are we?" Louise murmured in perplexity.

Penny flashed her light directly ahead. A series of four steps led down from the tunnel into an empty room which barely was six feet across. So far as she could see it had no exit.

"It looks as if we're at the end of the trail," Louise remarked in disappointment.

"This must be part of the Marborough house," Penny declared, descending the steps into the tiny room.

"But there's no way out of it except through the tunnel!"

"There must be if we can find it," Penny insisted.

Wandering about the room she began to explore the walls, and Louise followed her example. Their search was rewarded, for presently they discovered a small brass knob embedded in the rough board paneling. Penny pulled on it and a section of wall slid back.

"Now we're really in the Marborough house!"

she whispered excitedly. "The basement, I think."

Stepping through the opening, the girls made no sound as they tiptoed around in the dark, damp room. Penny's flashlight revealed that the walls had been boarded over, but there was no solid foundation beneath their feet, only a hard dirt floor. A steep stairway led up from the basement.

"Do you suppose Mrs. Marborough is here?" Penny whispered, listening.

There was no sound from above.

"Shall we go upstairs, or back the way we came?" she asked her chum.

"Let's risk being caught," Louise decided after a moment's hesitation. "I'd rather be sent to jail for house breaking than to climb into that well again."

Huddling together, the girls crept up the stairway. The landing was blocked by another door. Penny tested it, and finding it unlocked, pushed it gently open. Again they listened.

"The coast is clear," Louise whispered. "I'm sure Mrs. Marborough isn't here."

Penny stepped across the threshold, tense with anticipation. Ever since Mrs. Marborough's arrival in Riverview she had longed to see the interior of the grand old mansion. And now, through a strange quirk of adventure, her ambition was to be gratified.

Slowly she allowed the flashlight beam to play over the walls of the room. There were several pictures in massive gold frames, leading her to think that she had

entered a library or living room. Systematically, she continued to move the light about in search of furniture. So far as she could see there was none.

"The room is empty!" Louise whispered at her elbow.

A board squeaked beneath their weight as the girls tiptoed to a doorway opening into a still larger room.

"This must be the living room," Penny decided, observing a beautiful, circular stairway which rose to the second floor.

"But where is the furniture?" demanded Louise in bewilderment.

Penny's light cut squares across the room, but the only objects revealed were a chair and a table drawn close to the fireplace.

"What can this mean?" Louise gasped. "The house always has been furnished. Now everything is gone."

Penny did not answer. The sound of shuffling feet on the front porch caused both girls to freeze against the wall. Before they could retreat to the basement stairs, the living room door opened. Light from a street lamp cut a path across the bare floor.

Mrs. Marborough stood framed in the doorway. The girls had made no sound, yet the mistress of Rose Acres seemed to sense that she was not alone.

"Who is it?" she called sharply. "Speak up! Who is hiding here?"

CHAPTER

17

THE MARBOROUGH PEARLS

IN FRIGHTENED voices Penny and Louise acknowledged their presence in the dark room. Greatly relieved that the intruders were girls, Mrs. Marborough struck a match and lighted three half-burned candles which were set in a huge glass candelabra.

"Oh, so it's you!" she exclaimed as the flickering light fell upon their faces. "May I ask why you have broken into my house?"

"We're thoroughly ashamed of ourselves, Mrs. Marborough," Penny said apologetically.

"Indeed we are," added Louise. "When we started to investigate the wishing well we didn't intend to enter the house."

"Suppose you explain," suggested the mistress of Rose Acres.

"It's a long story," sighed Penny. "May we sit down somewhere?"

The request embarrassed Mrs. Marborough. She

hesitated, and then indicated that the girls were to follow her. To their surprise she led them through another empty room to the kitchen, there lighting a candle. Its soft illumination revealed an old oil stove, several chairs, a porcelain table and a cot which obviously served both as a day couch and bed.

Mrs. Marborough offered no explanation or apology. Taking wood from a box, she piled it into the fireplace, and soon had a cheerful blaze on the hearth.

Drawing their chairs to the fire, Penny and Louise explained how they had entered the old mansion. Mrs. Marborough listened attentively to their story but did not appear especially surprised.

"I've always known about that old tunnel," she said when they had finished. "It was built by the first owner of this house, many, many years ago, and I doubt if it ever was used. I tried to find the entrance from the basement a few days ago, but was unable to locate it."

"We saw you with your lantern at the wishing well," Louise confessed. "That was what aroused our curiosity."

"I was looking for the other tunnel entrance. I found it without much trouble, but it was so deep down in the well that I dared not risk trying to get into it. Although I considered hiring a man, I hesitated, because I knew it would cause talk."

Penny and Louise were feeling much more at ease, sensing that the mistress of Rose Acres no longer was

irritated by their actions. Eagerly they waited for her to reveal more.

"I suppose you think me a queer old lady," Mrs. Marborough resumed. "Perhaps I am, but I have a very good reason for some of the things I do. I came to Riverview to search for something which has been lost many years."

"Something hidden during the Civil War?" inquired Louise breathlessly.

"No, my dear, an object secreted by my sister, Virginia. Since you girls already have learned so much I will tell you all. Perhaps you have heard of the Marborough pearls?"

Penny and Louise shook their heads.

"I forget that you are so very young," Mrs. Marborough said. "Your mothers would remember. At any rate, the necklace was handed down in our family for many generations, always to the daughter who was the first to marry. Virginia, my younger sister, dreamed and hoped that the pearls would go to her. Naturally, I shared a similar desire. As it came about, I was the first of the family to marry."

"Then you received the necklace?" Louise commented.

"It should have gone to me, but my sister was determined I never should win such a victory over her. In a fit of anger she hid the pearls. Father tried to force her to tell what she had done with them, but she was very headstrong. She ran away from home, married

a scamp, and sailed with him to South America. She died there less than two years after my own marriage."

"What became of the pearls?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Our family believed that she took the necklace with her. For many years we assumed that Virginia's worthless husband had obtained possession of it. He denied any knowledge of the pearls, but we never accepted his story as true. Then, a few weeks ago, a letter came from South America. It had been written by Virginia's husband shortly before his death."

"He confessed to the theft of the necklace?" Louise asked, trying to speed the story.

"No, indeed. He merely enclosed a letter written by Virginia years before. It was addressed to me, and had never been sent, because her husband deliberately withheld it. Just selfish and cantankerous, that man was! The letter told where the pearls had been hidden. I imagine that Virginia's husband had planned to gain possession of them someday, but fate defeated him. So on his death bed he sent me the original letter which I should have received forty years earlier."

"Where were the pearls hidden?" Penny questioned, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "You haven't found them yet?"

"No, and I doubt that I ever shall," Mrs. Marborough sighed. "Virginia's letter was not very definite. She begged my forgiveness for having caused so much trouble, and said that she had hidden the necklace near the old wishing well."

"Didn't she tell you where?" Louise asked in disappointment.

"There were several words which had been blotted with ink. I suspect Virginia's husband did it to prevent anyone but himself from learning the hiding place. Then when he finally sent the letter to me, he may have forgotten what he had done. That's only my guess, of course. As the letter reads, my only clue is that the pearls were hidden near the wishing well."

"That explains why you were removing the flagstones the other night," Louise remarked.

"Yes, I've searched everywhere I can think of except in the old tunnel. When you girls went through it tonight, did you notice anything unusual?"

"No hiding place," Penny replied. "Of course we weren't looking for anything of the sort. If we could explore the passageway by daylight—"

"Can't we help you find the pearls, Mrs. Marborough?" Louise interrupted. "It would be such fun searching for them."

"I'll be very happy to have your help," the old lady said, smiling. "Upon one condition. You must tell no one. Already I am the laughing stock of Riverview and if this latest story should get around everyone would talk."

Penny and Louise promptly assured her that they would tell no one about the pearls.

"Another thing—" Mrs. Marborough hesitated and then went on. "I suppose you understand now why

I never invited you into the house. It wasn't that I meant to be inhospitable."

"Because the place isn't fixed up?" Louise came to her aid. "Why, Penny and I would have thought nothing of it. This is a cozy kitchen with a cheerful fire. I think it's nice."

"I probably shan't be here long. My purpose in returning to Riverview was to find the pearls. I've nearly made up my mind that they are lost forever."

"Oh, don't say that!" Penny cried. "Tomorrow, with your permission, Louise and I will explore the tunnel. We may have luck."

"I shall be very glad to have your help, my dear." Again Mrs. Marborough groped for words and finished awkwardly: "Please, I beg of you, don't tell anyone what you have seen tonight, particularly the barren state of this house."

"We understand," Penny said gravely.

The fire had burned low. Mindful that they must be home early, the girls bade Mrs. Marborough goodbye, promising to return the following day. Once outside the mansion, they paused beside a tree so that Penny might remove the heavy coveralls which she still wore over her frock.

"What a night!" she murmured happily.

"For once, Penny, one of your crazy adventures turned out beautifully," Louise praised. "We'll have a wonderful time searching for that necklace! She's certainly queer though."

"Mrs. Marborough?"

"Yes, imagine being so sensitive about how the interior of her house looks. Who would expect it to be fixed up nicely after standing empty so many years?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Penny asked. She hopped grotesquely on one foot as she extricated the other from the coveralls.

"Forgetting what?" Louise demanded, puzzled.

"Remember that first day we peeped into the house through the window?"

"Why, yes, what about it?"

"Your memory isn't very good, Louise. Don't you remember the sheet-draped furniture we saw?"

"That's right! I had forgotten. What became of it?"

"If I had just one guess, I'd say—Mr. Butterworth."

"Who is he, Penny?"

"A second-hand dealer who buys old furniture, newspapers, rubber tires—everything except bottles."

"Not that funny looking man we saw enter this house the other day!"

"The same. Louise, it's my guess that Mrs. Marborough sold all of her valuable antiques—probably for a fraction of their true worth."

"How foolish of her. Why would she do that?"

"Don't you understand?" Penny asked patiently. "There can be but one explanation. Mrs. Marborough isn't wealthy any more. She's living in dire poverty and trying to keep people from learning the truth."

CHAPTER

18

SIGNBOARD INDIANS

THE REALIZATION that in all likelihood Mrs. Marborough had sold her valuable antiques to the second-hand dealer was disconcerting to Louise as well as Penny. They did not believe that Mr. Butterworth would pay a fractional part of the furniture's true value, and apparently the widow's only reason for parting with her treasures was an urgent need for money.

"Of course, I may have guessed wrong about it," Penny admitted as she and Louise started toward home. "Just to check up, I'll call at Mr. Butterworth's shop tomorrow and see what I can learn."

"I wish we dared tell someone about the condition of the house," Louise said thoughtfully. "Why, if Mrs. Marborough is in need, Mother would help."

"So would Mrs. Weems," added Penny. "But we gave our promise not to reveal anything we saw. For the time-being, our hands are tied."

The events of the night had made the girls eager to return again to Rose Acres to search for the missing pearl necklace. They agreed that immediately after school the next afternoon they would call upon Mr. Butterworth and then keep their appointment with the widow.

"Remember, we mustn't tell anyone what we have learned," Penny warned as she parted company with her chum. "Not even Rhoda."

Throughout the following day, both girls were so excited that they found it all but impossible to study. When the closing bell finally brought release, they bolted from the school building before any of their classmates could detain them.

"I have the address of Mr. Butterworth's shop," Penny said, consulting a paper. "It's not far from here."

The building proved to be a typical second-hand store with old tables and chairs piled in the windows along with cut glass and bric-a-brac. Entering, the girls wandered about until a woman asked them if they were searching for anything in particular.

"We're interested in furniture," Penny explained. "Old pieces—antiques if we can find them."

"Come into the back room," the woman invited. "Mr. Butterworth bought a number of pieces just a few days ago. From one of Riverview's best homes too."

"Where was that?" inquired Louise.

"I didn't hear him mention the name. It was from a house that has been closed many years. The owner returned only a short time ago and is closing out everything."

The girls did not doubt that the furniture under discussion had been obtained from Rose Acres. They were certain of it as they viewed rosewood and mahogany chairs, imported mirrors, porcelain ornaments, massive four-poster beds, sofas with damaged coverings, and handsome chests and bureaus. Penny ventured to price a few of the items. The amount asked was so low that she knew Mr. Butterworth had paid an extremely small sum to the widow. Making an excuse for not purchasing, she and Louise escaped to the street.

"There's no question about it," Penny declared as they set off for Rose Acres. "Mrs. Marborough sold her beautiful things to Mr. Butterworth."

"He can't appreciate their value or he never would offer them at such low prices," Louise added. "Anyone who buys those things will obtain wonderful bargains."

Penny nodded soberly. Lost in thought, she had little to say until the girls drew near Rose Acres.

"Don't let on to Mrs. Marborough that we've learned about the furniture," she warned. "It's really none of our affair if she sells her belongings."

The widow had been expecting the girls and had

everything in readiness to explore the tunnel. While they searched it from end to end, she waited hopefully at the wishing well.

"Have you found anything?" she called several times.

"Not yet," Penny would reply patiently.

She and Louise laboriously examined every inch of the bricked passageway but with fading hope. The walls were firm, giving no indication that anything ever had been hidden behind or within them. To have excavated the hard-packed dirt flooring was a task not to be considered at the moment.

"There's nothing here," Penny whispered to her chum. "I doubt that the pearls ever were hidden in this tunnel."

"Mrs. Marborough will be terribly disappointed," Louise replied in an undertone. "What shall we tell her?"

"We can pretend to keep on searching. Maybe if we prowl about this place for a few days, we'll have luck."

"The pearls were hidden near the wishing well. We have that much to go on."

"They may have disappeared years ago," Penny contributed pessimistically. "To tell you the truth, I don't feel very hopeful about ever finding them."

Leaving the tunnel by means of the easier exit, the girls emerged into the basement. They were prepar-

ing to climb the stairs to the first floor when Mrs. Marborough's voice reached their ears almost as plainly as if she were in the cellar.

"Louise! Penny! Are you all right?"

Startled by the clearness of the call, the girls paused on the stairway.

"Why, her voice came through as plainly as if she were in this room!" Louise exclaimed. "You don't suppose Mrs. Marborough has ventured into the passageway?"

Thoroughly alarmed, the girls raced up the stairway and out of the house into the yard. To their relief they saw Mrs. Marborough standing by the wishing well, peering anxiously down.

"Oh, here you are!" she murmured as they ran up. "I was beginning to get worried. The last time I called you did not answer."

"We were down in the basement," Penny explained. "Mrs. Marborough, your voice came through to us as plainly as if you were in the passage."

The disclosure did not seem to surprise the widow, for she smiled and said:

"I've always known that sound carried from the well to the house. In fact, in past years I found it amusing to listen to conversations carried on by persons who never dreamed that their words were overheard."

"Then that explains why so many wishes which were made here at the well came true!" Penny cried. "You were the Good Fairy behind it all."

"Oh, now and then, if it pleased my fancy, I arranged to have a wish granted," Mrs. Marborough acknowledged, smiling grimly. "That was in the days when I had money—" she broke off and ended—"more than I have now, I mean."

"Mrs. Marborough, you must have heard those wishes we made the day of your return to Riverview," Penny said after a moment. "Were you responsible for sending a basket of food to Rhoda's people?"

"I am afraid I was."

"And did you grant Rhoda's second wish?" Louise asked quickly. "Did you have anything to do with getting her brother, Ted, a job?"

"Judge Harlan is an old friend of mine," Mrs. Marborough explained. "I merely wrote him a note suggesting that he would do me a favor by helping the boy if he found him worthy."

Although the widow's admission cleared up much of the mystery which had surrounded the old wishing well, Louise and Penny were dumbfounded, nevertheless. Never once had anyone in Riverview connected Mrs. Marborough with a particularly charitable deed.

As if guessing their thoughts, the woman said sharply:

"Now mind, I'll not have you telling this around the town! I'm through with all such silly business, and I don't propose to have busybodies discuss whether or not I am addle-brained!"

"Why, Mrs. Marborough!" protested Louise. "It was a kind, generous thing to do."

"Generous, fiddlesticks! I did it because it pleased me and for no other reason. Let's not talk about it any more."

Mrs. Marborough questioned the girls concerning their exploration of the tunnel. Her disappointment over the failure to find the pearls was keen but she tried not to show it.

"I knew it was a fool's errand coming to Riverview to look for that stupid necklace!" she declared. "Like as not, it never was hidden at Rose Acres, my sister's letter to the contrary. I intend to forget about the whole affair."

"Oh, Mrs. Marborough, don't give up so soon," Penny pleaded. "Louise and I have only started to search. We may find it yet."

"You've been very nice," the widow said, smiling almost in a friendly way. "I'll remember it always when I am far away."

"Then you intend to leave Riverview?" Louise asked in disappointment.

"I must sell Rose Acres. I have no other course open."

"Not to Jay Franklin, I hope!" Penny exclaimed.

"I have no intention of dealing with him if anyone else will make an offer. So far I have found no other person who is interested in the property."

Drawing a deep sigh, Mrs. Marborough arose. Without much enthusiasm she invited the girls to come

with her into the house, but they tactfully declined.

"We'll come again tomorrow, if you don't mind," Penny said as she and Louise turned to leave.

"Do," replied Mrs. Marborough. "We might make a final search for the pearls."

Enroute to Riverview, the girls talked over the situation and agreed that the prospect of finding the necklace was a slim one. They had grown to like the eccentric widow and were sorry that she had decided to move away from the city of her birth.

"I am sure if she had money she would remain here," Louise declared. "And it will nearly kill her if she is forced to deal with Jay Franklin. How she does dislike him!"

Parting with her chum in the business section of Riverview, Penny went directly to the *Star* office. Her father was ready to start home.

"Anything new about Jay Franklin and those record stones he hopes to sell to the museum?" Penny inquired absently as the automobile sped along the congested streets.

"Nothing you haven't heard," Mr. Parker replied. "Franklin expects to make the sale and probably will. The museum people have put themselves on record as saying that the stones bear authentic writing."

"Then it appears that your original hunch was incorrect," Penny observed. "Too bad you played down the story in the *Star*."

"I may have made a mistake. All the same, I am

pinning my hopes on the expert from Brimwell College."

"What expert, Dad?"

"I guess I neglected to tell you. The *Star* hired Professor Anjus from Brimwell to inspect the stones. His opinion doesn't coincide with that of the museum experts. He has pronounced them fakes."

"If the experts can't agree, then how can one prove anything?"

"It is something of a tangle," Mr. Parker smiled. "I turned that tool you obtained from Crocker over to Professor Anjus. He expects to make exhaustive tests and to report to me within a few days."

The car had reached the outskirts of Riverview. As it passed along streets which were sparsely dotted with houses, Penny called attention to several large billboards which disfigured the landscape.

"Look, Dad!" she directed, pointing to a particularly colorful poster. "An Indian show is coming to town next week!"

Mr. Parker turned his head to gaze at the billboard. To Penny's amazement, he suddenly slammed on the brake, bringing the car to a lurching halt at the side of the road.

"That's it!" he cried, his eyes on the huge sign. "The motive! I couldn't figure it out, but now I have the clue I need! Penny, we'll put a crimp in Jay Franklin's little game, or my name isn't Anthony Parker!"

CHAPTER

19

PUBLICITY PLUS

COMPLETELY MYSTIFIED by her father's remarks, Penny waited for him to explain.

"Don't you get it?" he asked, waving his hand toward the big signboard. "The finding of those stones bearing Elizabethan and Indian writing was perfectly timed! It's all a publicity stunt for the coming show!"

"How could it be?" Penny questioned, scarcely able to accept her father's theory. "I found one of the rocks myself. I know I wasn't hired by any Indian show!"

"It was pure luck that you stumbled into the stone, Penny. If you hadn't, someone hired by the Indian show would have brought it to light."

"But where does Jay Franklin figure in, Dad? You don't think he's connected with the publicity scheme as you call it!"

"Franklin wouldn't have sufficient imagination to pull off a stunt like that," Mr. Parker declared. "No,

he may actually believe in the authenticity of the stones. At any rate, he saw an opportunity to make a little money for himself and seized it."

"Why should an Indian show go to the trouble of having stones carved and planted in various fields? It doesn't make sense."

"The resulting publicity should draw state-wide attention to the show, Penny. It's just the sort of idea which would appeal to a clever publicity agent. Every newspaper in Riverview except the *Star* has fallen for it, giving columns of space to the story."

"I still don't see how the show will gain. Its name never has been mentioned in connection with the finding of the stones."

"Of course not, Penny. That would be too crude. But at the proper time, the publicity agent will twist all of the stories to his own purpose."

"Dad," said Penny sadly, "in the past you have accused me of having wild ideas. I think the score is even now."

"I'll have that show traced," Mr. Parker declared, paying no heed to his daughter. "Since it is coming to Riverview next week it can't be far away now. I may find it worth while to call on the publicity agent and have a little chat with him."

Penny was gazing at the billboard again, reading the dates.

"Dad, the show will play here during Pilgrimage Week," she declared. "What a shame! It's certain to

take away customers from a much more worthwhile event."

"There may not be an Indian show," responded Mr. Parker grimly. "Not when I get through with the outfit!"

Immediately upon arriving at home, the publisher called the newspaper office, delegating City Editor DeWitt to obtain complete information about the Indian Show and to report to him. All evening he talked of his theory until both Penny and Mrs. Weems confessed that they were a bit weary of redskins.

"I shall write an editorial for tomorrow's *Star*," Mr. Parker announced. "Even if I haven't absolute facts, I'll drop a few broad hints about those fake stones!"

The editorial, cleverly worded but with very definite implications, was composed that night, and telephoned to the newspaper office. Penny had the pleasure of reading it at breakfast the next morning.

"You certainly did yourself proud, Dad," she praised. "However, I imagine the museum people aren't going to be too pleased. Nor certain other folks in this town."

"Let me take a look at it," Mr. Parker requested, reaching for the paper.

As Penny offered it to him, the doorbell rang. Mrs. Weems was busy in the kitchen so the girl arose and went to answer it. Jay Franklin stood on the porch.

"Good morning," he said in a hard voice. "Is your father here?"

"Yes, he is eating breakfast," Penny responded. "Won't you come in, please?"

Mr. Franklin walked ahead of her into the living room.

"Good morning, Jay," called the editor, who was able to see the caller from his chair at the breakfast table. "Will you have a cup of coffee with us?"

Ignoring the invitation, Mr. Franklin entered the dinette, blocking the doorway. From his pocket he took a copy of the morning *Star*.

"Parker," he said curtly, "I've just read your editorial and I demand an explanation! Do you realize what you've done?"

"Written a pretty fair stickful—or so my daughter tells me," Mr. Parker smiled undisturbed.

"You've deliberately tried to smear me," the real estate man accused.

"I don't recall that your name was mentioned in the editorial."

"No, but you know I expect to sell those two stones to the museum. This editorial of yours may queer the sale!"

"Then it will have fulfilled its purpose. The stones are fakes. If you aren't aware of it, I suggest that you acquaint yourself with the true facts."

"Those stones bear genuine Elizabethan writing. There's no connection with any cheap Indian show, and I defy you to prove it!"

"Consider your challenge accepted," replied Mr.

Parker evenly. "I expect to publish the true facts very shortly in the *Star*."

"If you prevent me from making a sale to the museum, I'll sue you!" Jay Franklin threatened. "That's all I have to say. Good morning!"

In his anger he turned so quickly that he ran into Penny who stood directly behind him. Without bothering to apologize, he brushed past her, out the front door.

"What a dreadful man!" remarked Mrs. Weems who had heard the conversation from the kitchen.

"I rather expected him to call, although not so early in the morning," the publisher remarked, reaching for a slice of toast. "His attitude doesn't bother me in the least."

"He may actually sue you if you don't make good on producing facts," Penny commented. "How are you going to do it?"

"DeWitt informs me that the Indian Show is playing at Bryan this week. I'll drive over there today and see what I can learn."

Bryan was a small city located sixty-nine miles from Riverview. Although Penny ordinarily would have spent the day in school, she immediately decided that her father would need her assistance. Accordingly, she begged so hard to accompany him that he finally gave his consent.

Early afternoon saw Mr. Parker and his daughter at the outskirts of Bryan where two large blue and red

show tents had been set up. A band played, and townspeople were pouring past the ticket-taker, an Indian who wore the headdress of a chieftain.

"It looks rather interesting," Penny remarked wistfully.

Mr. Parker stripped a bill from his wallet and gave it to her.

"Go buy yourself a ticket," he said, smiling. "I'll meet you here by the entrance in an hour."

"Don't you want to see the show, Dad?"

"I've outgrown such foolishness," he rejoined. "I'll find the publicity agent and have my little talk with him."

The enticing sound of tom-toms and Indian war whoops caused Penny to forget her desire to meet the show's publicity man. Saying goodbye to her father, she bought a ticket and hastened into the big top. For an hour she sat through a very mediocre performance, consisting in the main part of cowboy and Indian horseback riding. The concluding event, a tableau, depicted an attack by redskins upon an early English colony settlement. It was all very boring, and Penny left in the middle of the performance.

Mr. Parker was not waiting at the entrance way. Loitering about for a time, she inquired of a workman and learned that her father was in one of the small tents close by. The flap had been rolled back, permitting her to see a sharp-faced man of thirty who sat at a desk piled with papers.

"Is that the show's publicity agent?" she asked the workman.

"Yep, Bill McJavins," he answered. "He's sure put new life into this outfit. We've been packin' them in ever since he took over."

Within a few minutes Mr. Parker joined Penny and from the expression of his face, she immediately guessed that his interview had not been very successful.

"I take it that Bill McJavins didn't break down and confess all?" she inquired lightly.

"He denied any connection with those stones found in Riverview," Mr. Parker replied. "But in the next breath he admitted he knew all about them and intends to capitalize on the story."

"Just how will it help the show?"

"From what McJavins told me, I gather the program includes an historical pageant."

"That would be a flattering name for it."

"In the pageant, Indians attack a white settlement. A beautiful maiden escapes, and chisels on a stone tablet an account of the massacre—then she, too, succumbs to the tomahawk."

"You seem to know more about the show than I," Penny laughed. "Anyway, I'm glad to learn how it came out!"

"It's my guess that McJavins hopes to profit by a tie-up between the stone writing of the pageant and the finding of similar rocks near Riverview. It's a cheap trick, and the hoax would have been exposed

a long time ago if museum authorities were awake!"

Neither discouraged nor too much elated by the results of the trip, Mr. Parker and Penny returned to Riverview. It was exactly noon when they reached the newspaper office.

"I trust you plan to attend school this afternoon," the editor reminded his daughter. "By lunching downtown you'll have plenty of time to get there."

Loitering about the newsroom as long as she dared, Penny crossed the street to have a sandwich at a quick-lunch cafe. As she reached the restaurant she observed a familiar figure coming toward her.

"Rhoda Wiegand!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you going in the wrong direction?"

"I'm cutting classes for the afternoon," the trailer camp girl replied, pausing. "Mr. Coaten expects me to meet him at the Fischer Building. Can you tell me where it is?"

"Three blocks straight down the street," Penny directed. She hesitated and then said: "Rhoda, it's none of my affair, but I do hope you're not agreeing to Mr. Coaten's proposal."

"The adoption? Yes, I am, Penny. I've tried to hold out against them all, but I can't do it. Ted signed the papers two days ago. Since then I've had no peace. Ted keeps after me, the Breens want me to do it, and Mr. Coaten says I am selfish."

"We both know Mr. Coaten intends to profit in some way at your expense."

"I do feel that way about it. If only I dared stand firm—"

"You must," Penny said earnestly. Deliberately taking Rhoda's arm she turned her about. "You're to break that appointment and have luncheon with me. I'll assume all the responsibility."

CHAPTER

20

RHODA'S PROBLEM

RHODA ALLOWED herself to be dissuaded, but not without misgiving. As she lunched with Penny at the Dolman Cafe, she painted a gloomy picture of what lay before her.

"You don't understand how it is," she said, slowly stirring a cup of hot chocolate. "I really haven't a good reason for refusing to consent to the adoption. If I had one scrap of evidence against Mr. Coaten it would be different."

"Can't you write to Texas and inquire about him and his friend?"

"I did," Rhoda admitted. "The answer came back that Mr. Coaten was unknown at the address he gave the Breens."

"I should think that would be sufficient reason for distrusting him."

"Oh, Mr. Coaten explained it by saying that his

family just moved to a new house, and that he inadvertently had given me the wrong address."

"Did you ask for the second one, Rhoda?"

"Yes, he gave it to me. So far I've not had time for a reply."

"My advice is to stall for time," Penny said. "If we have even a few days more we may dig up some information. However, I'll confess I haven't an idea at the moment."

"Mr. Coaten will be furious because I didn't keep the appointment," Rhoda sighed. "He's certain to come to the trailer camp tonight and demand an explanation."

"Just tell him you changed your mind and refuse to say anything more. I wish I could talk to him."

"So do I," declared Rhoda with emphasis. "Why not take dinner with us tonight—if you can stand our brand of hospitality."

"Well, I don't know," Penny hesitated. "Louise and I plan to go to Mrs. Marborough's place directly after school—"

"Oh, I wish I could go with you!" Rhoda declared impulsively. "I never have had an opportunity to finish my sketch. Mrs. Marborough is such an interesting character, too."

"You don't know the half of it," laughed Penny. "You're welcome to come along. I think Mrs. Marborough will be willing to share our secret with you."

"Secret?"

"No questions now, please," Penny requested, capturing both luncheon checks. "We must hurry or we'll be late for school."

Having assured Mrs. Marborough that she would disclose nothing about the lost pearl necklace, she could not honorably share the adventure with her friend. However, it was her hope and belief that the widow would be willing to allow Rhoda to aid in the exciting search of the premises.

Penny's surmise proved entirely correct. Later that afternoon when the three girls called at Rose Acres, Mrs. Marborough scarcely noticed that Rhoda was an uninvited member of the party. At once she began talking of the missing pearls, which to the satisfaction of Louise and Penny, necessitated a complete explanation.

"Imagine finding a tunnel leading from the old wishing well to the house!" Rhoda cried in delight. "Take me through it! Show me everything!"

"Perhaps you can find the pearls," Penny laughed. "So far Louise and I have failed."

"They're supposed to be hidden somewhere near the old wishing well," Louise contributed. "That's the only real clue we have."

"I suppose you looked under the flagstones?"

"I did that many days ago," answered Mrs. Marborough. "In fact, I don't think there's a single place I haven't searched."

"The roof of the well?" Rhoda suggested.

"We never once thought of that place!" Louise exclaimed. "But how could the necklace be secreted there?" She frowned as she stared at the steep-pitched, shingled covering which formed a protection over the well.

"It's worth looking at anyhow!" Penny declared. "I'll get a ladder if I can find one."

"In the woodshed," directed Mrs. Marborough.

Penny soon returned carrying a dust-laden step-ladder which had not seen service in many years. Bracing it against the well, she mounted and began to inspect the roof.

"Find anything?" inquired Rhoda impatiently.

"Two birds' nests. There seems to be a hole under the edge of the roofing—"

Penny broke off as she ran her hand into the narrow opening.

"Yes, there is something here!" she exclaimed a moment later. "It feels like a tiny box!"

Mrs. Marborough and the two girls waited tensely, hardly daring to hope. Penny withdrew her hand from the hole, triumphantly holding up a small leather case.

"This isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, yes!" Mrs. Marborough cried. "It is the old jewel case. The pearls must be inside!"

In her haste to climb down from the ladder, Penny missed one of the steps. Rhoda seized her arm saving her from a hard fall. Recovering her breath, Penny

politely offered the jewel case to Mrs. Marborough.

With the three girls clustered about her, the mistress of Rose Acres ceremoniously opened the lid. In a nest of yellowed silk lay a string of matched pearls, so beautiful and lustrous that no one could find words to admire it.

"The famous Marborough pearls," the widow murmured at last. "This necklace brought only unhappiness to our family. Now, however, they shall serve a useful purpose!"

The girls gazed at Mrs. Marborough expectantly, waiting for her to continue:

"I shall sell the pearls," she said quietly. "They represent a small fortune, and by disposing of them I'll be well-provided for in my old age. It won't be necessary for me to pinch and skrimp. I'll be able to hold my head up in society—live like a human being again instead of a recluse."

Realizing that she was revealing a great deal, Mrs. Marborough snapped shut the jewel case and smiled at the girls.

"I never should have found the pearls by myself. To tell you that I am grateful scarcely expresses my feelings. You've saved me from poverty."

"Rhoda did it," Penny declared, giving full credit to the trailer-camp girl. "Louise and I never would have thought of searching the roof of the well."

"Do come inside," Mrs. Marborough invited gaily. "We'll have tea in my kitchen. It's not much to offer,

but I did bake a little sponge cake this morning."

No longer ashamed of the barren condition of the old mansion, the widow led the girls through the great empty rooms. By daylight, notwithstanding the stained condition of the walls, the house seemed more elegant than ever. There was a large fan-shaped window of stained glass which Penny had not noticed before, and dozens of candle holders attached to the walls.

"How gorgeous this place would look if all the candles could be lighted at one time," she remarked admiringly.

"And if the house had a little furniture in it," added Mrs. Marborough. "You know, a few days ago I did a very foolish thing."

Louise glanced quickly at Penny but said nothing.

"I was a bit hard pressed for money," the widow resumed. "On an impulse I sold all my furniture to Mr. Butterworth. Do you suppose he will sell it back to me?"

"He should," declared Penny.

"I like Riverview for I was born here," Mrs. Marborough went on, talking as if to herself. "By selling the pearls I can refurnish the house, have the grounds restored to their original beauty, and live as I formerly did!"

"Oh, I do hope you decide to stay here," Penny said eagerly.

Mrs. Marborough started a fire in the kitchen stove

and put a kettle of water on to boil. Soon the tea was ready, and was served with generous slices of yellow sponge cake.

"I suppose everyone in Riverview considers me a crotchety old woman," Mrs. Marborough remarked presently. "I haven't been very friendly because I didn't want folks to know I had sold my furniture. Some days ago a group of women came to see me about opening the house for some sort of Festival—"

"Pilgrimage Week," Penny supplied.

"I turned them down, not because I wasn't eager to help, but because I couldn't let folks know all my furniture was gone. I wonder if they would still care to include Rose Acres in the tour of houses?"

"Oh, Mrs. Marborough, it would practically save the Festival!" Penny cried. "A cheap Indian show is coming to town the same week. I know for a fact that the Festival tickets aren't selling very well."

"Everyone wants to see Rose Acres," Louise added enthusiastically.

"If I can re-purchase my furniture, I'll be glad to open the house to the public," Mrs. Marborough said, her eyes twinkling as she gazed directly at Penny. "That was the wish you made at the well, I believe?"

"Oh, it was! And you'll make it come true!"

"It's little enough to do in return for the favor you have bestowed upon me."

"Nothing will please me more than to see this old

house in all its glory!" Penny declared enthusiastically. "May we light all the candles at one time?"

"If you like."

"And wouldn't it be fun to hold a grand ball here with everyone dressed in colonial costume!" Penny went on. "Can't you just see the place with beaux and their ladies dancing a quadrille?"

"I'll talk to the members of the Festival Committee tomorrow," Mrs. Marborough promised. "My first call, however, will be upon Mr. Butterworth."

Long shadows were falling, and the girls soon arose to depart. During the walk into Riverview, Rhoda became rather sober and Penny shrewdly guessed that she had forgotten about the Marborough pearls and was thinking of the dreaded interview with Mr. Coaten.

"You're really afraid to meet that man aren't you?" she asked curiously.

"Not exactly afraid," Rhoda responded. "He'll be waiting though, I'm sure. I just don't know what to tell him."

"Will it be easier for you if I go with you to the camp?"

"Oh, I wish you would, Penny!" Rhoda said gratefully.

Louise soon parted with her friends, and the two girls went on to the trailer camp. Mrs. Breen immediately informed them that Mr. Coaten had called ear-

lier in the afternoon and expected to return again.

"I hope you didn't make trouble about signing the papers," she said severely. "He acted quite upset."

"I broke our appointment," Rhoda responded briefly. "So far I've not made up my mind what to do."

There followed a lengthy argument in which Mrs. Breen assured the girl that she was making a serious mistake by antagonizing such a kind, generous man as Mr. Coaten. Penny took no part in the conversation, although she readily could see how difficult had become Rhoda's position.

"You'll have to stay to dinner now," Rhoda whispered to her. "Mr. Coaten is certain to come, and I can't stand against them all."

Penny had no desire to remain for a meal, but feeling that she should support her friend, accepted the invitation. Ted soon came home from working at Judge Harlan's office, and he too expressed displeasure because his sister had broken the appointment with Mr. Coaten.

During dinner the subject was studiously avoided. Somewhat to Penny's disapproval, Rhoda began to tell the Breens about everything that had occurred at Rose Acres. At mention of the pearl necklace, Ted's fork clattered against his plate and he forgot to eat.

"You actually found a string of pearls?" he asked incredulously. "Real ones?"

"They must be worth many thousand dollars,"

Rhoda assured him. "Mrs. Marborough intends to sell them and use the money to remodel her place."

Ted was about to ask another question, then seemed to reconsider.

"More stew?" Mrs. Breen asked as an awkward silence fell.

"No thanks, Mom," he answered. "If you'll excuse me, I'll skip out. I have a date uptown with a fellow."

Mrs. Breen made no reply and the boy left the trailer. Penny thought that she too should be leaving, but before she could speak, there came a light tap on the door. Mr. Breen thrust his head out the open window.

"It's Mr. Coaten," he announced in a hoarse whisper. "What are you going to tell him Rhoda?"

"I don't know," she answered, gazing helplessly at Penny.

CHAPTER

21

MRS. MARBOROUGH'S LOSS

MRS. BREEN hastily removed her apron and opened the door to admit the caller.

"Good evening," said Mr. Coaten. His gaze roved from one person to another in the crowded little room, coming to rest upon Rhoda.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep our appointment this afternoon," she said stiffly. "The truth is, I've changed my mind about signing that paper."

"I've tried to talk sense into her," Mrs. Breen broke in. "I don't know what's come over the girl lately."

Mr. Coaten seated himself on the day bed, smiling at Rhoda in a friendly way.

"I understand how you feel," he said. "You are afraid you don't know me well enough to agree to the adoption."

"I never heard of you until you came to Riverview."

"Rhoda, that's no way to talk!" Mrs. Breen reprimanded. "What would we have done without Mr.

Coaten? He's given us money, bought groceries, and made everything much easier."

"I appreciate everything. It's just that—well, I don't care to be adopted. I like things as they are."

Mrs. Breen's kindly face tightened into hard lines.

"Rhoda," she said firmly, "this is an opportunity for you, and you ought to be smart enough to realize it. Mr. Coaten will give you good clothes and schooling. Pop and I can't do it."

"You've given me too much now," Rhoda murmured, her gaze on the linoleum rug.

"I've been patient with you, but now I'm going to have my say. We can't keep you any more."

"You're telling me to go?" Rhoda gasped, scarcely believing that she had heard correctly.

"I'm asking you to sign whatever it is that Mr. Coaten wants you to."

Rhoda gazed at Penny, her lips trembling. There seemed but one course open to her, for she had no money and no relatives. Fully aware of her predicament, Mr. Coaten smiled triumphantly. From his pocket he whipped out a fountain pen and a folded, neatly-typed paper.

"Rhoda, don't sign unless you really wish to," Penny said quietly.

"But I'll have no home—"

"You may stay with me. I'll find a place for you."

Directing her gaze upon Mr. Coaten, Penny resumed:

"May I ask why you are so eager to obtain a guardianship over Ted and Rhoda? What do you expect to gain by it?"

"My dear young lady—" Mr. Coaten's voice was soft but his eyes glinted angrily. "I expect to gain nothing."

"I gathered a different impression when I heard you and your friend talking a night or so ago at the Marborough place."

At first Mr. Coaten did not appear to understand, then as Penny's meaning dawned upon him, he arose from the couch.

"I have no wish to discuss this matter with you—a stranger," he said coldly. "For some reason you are prejudiced against me, and have deliberately influenced Rhoda to go against Mrs. Breen's desires."

"It's a question for our own family to settle," Mrs. Breen added.

"I'll go at once," said Penny. She gazed questioningly at Rhoda.

"Do you really think you could take me in at your place?" the girl asked.

"Of course. My offer holds."

"Then I'll come with you!" Darting to a wardrobe closet, Rhoda began to toss garments into a suitcase.

"Rhoda, you can't go like this!" Mrs. Breen cried in protest. "Why won't you listen to reason?"

"Let her go!" Mr. Coaten said harshly. "She'll come back in a day or two glad to accept my offer."

Rhoda paid no heed to the conversation which flowed about her. Swiftly she packed her suitcase and told Penny that she was ready to leave.

"Mrs. Breen," she said, squeezing the woman's hand in parting, "you and Pop have been wonderful to Ted and me. I'll never forget it—never. Someday I'll repay you, too."

"This is the way you do it," Mrs. Breen retorted bitterly. "By defying my wishes."

There was nothing more to be said. Penny and Rhoda quickly left the trailer, carrying the suitcase between them.

"I shouldn't have done it," the girl murmured contritely. "I don't know how I'll ever manage to make a living. Ted likely will side against me, too."

"Don't think of anything tonight," Penny advised, although she too was worried. "We'll find something for you. Dad may have an opening on the *Star*."

Mrs. Weems long ago had ceased to be surprised by anything that Penny did, and so, when the two girls arrived at the Parker home, she did not ask many questions. Rhoda was comfortably established in the guest room and made to feel that she was welcome. However, ultimately learning what had occurred, the housekeeper was not at all certain that Penny had done right by helping the girl to leave home. Nor was Mr. Parker encouraging about the prospects of finding employment.

"Can she type or take shorthand?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't think so," Penny admitted.

"The *Star* can't be made a catch-all for your unemployed friends," Mr. Parker resumed severely. "My advice is to send her back to the Breens."

"I can't do that, Dad. You don't understand."

"Well, let it ride for a few days," her father replied, frowning. "I'll see what I can do."

Penny tried to keep Rhoda from realizing that her presence in the household had created a problem. In the morning the girls went to school together, returned for lunch, and then attended the afternoon session. Rhoda became increasingly gloomy.

"Penny, this can't go on indefinitely," she protested. "I'll have to get a job somehow."

"Let me worry about that."

"Ted hasn't come to see me either," Rhoda went on nervously. "I—I'm beginning to think I should go back and sign that paper."

"Don't even consider it," Penny said firmly. "You need diversion to keep your mind off the problem. Let's hike out to the Marborough place!"

Carrying their books, the girls set off for Rose Acres. Several windows on the lower floor of the house had been opened to admit fresh air and the blinds no longer were drawn. For the first time since Mrs. Marborough's return, the old mansion actually had a "lived in" appearance. However, although Penny knocked many times, the widow did not come to the door.

"She can't be here," Rhoda remarked at last.

"The windows are open," Penny said thoughtfully. "I doubt that Mrs. Marborough would go very far away without closing them."

The girls wandered to the wishing well, and then made a complete tour of the grounds. Mrs. Marborough was nowhere in the yard.

"Shall we go?" Rhoda asked.

"I'll knock on the door just once more," Penny said. "I can't help feeling that she is here."

Circling the house to the side entrance, the girls again rapped and waited.

"Listen!" commanded Penny suddenly.

"I don't hear anything," declared Rhoda, startled by the manner in which her companion had given the command.

"I thought someone called or groaned—the sound came from inside the house."

"You must have imagined it."

"Maybe I did," Penny acknowledged, "but I don't think so."

Testing the door, she found it unlocked. As it swung back a tiny crack, she called loudly: "Oh, Mrs. Marborough, are you at home?"

Distinctly, both girls heard an answering cry, but the words were unintelligible. The sound had come from the direction of the kitchen.

"Mrs. Marborough must be ill!" Penny gasped, for the voice had been very weak.

Hesitating no longer, she entered the house, and with Rhoda trailing close behind, ran to the kitchen. Mrs. Marborough, still garbed in night clothing, lay on the daybed, her face ashen. The woman breathed with the greatest of difficulty, and both girls knew at once that she was seriously ill.

"My heart—" Mrs. Marborough whispered. "An attack—last night."

"Rhoda, run as fast as you can and get Doctor Hamilton," Penny said tersely. "I'll stay here."

As soon as her friend had gone, she busied herself trying to make Mrs. Marborough comfortable. She rearranged the disordered blankets, and fanned air toward the woman, making it easier for her to breathe.

"My pearls," Mrs. Marborough whispered after a moment. "They're gone."

Penny thought little of the remark, deciding that the widow was not entirely rational.

"Oh, you have the necklace," she said soothingly. "Don't you remember? We found it yesterday."

"Gone—" Mrs. Marborough repeated. "It gave me such a shock—I had hidden the pearls in the teapot. This morning—"

Penny bent closer, suddenly realizing that the old lady was in possession of her faculties and was trying to disclose something of great importance.

"I went there this morning," Mrs. Marborough completed with difficulty. "The pearls were gone. They've been stolen. Now I have nothing."

CHAPTER

22

THE MISSING NECKLACE

PENNY TRIED to quiet the old lady by assuring her that the pearl necklace must be somewhere in the house.

"No—no, it is gone," Mrs. Marborough insisted. "A thief entered the house during the night. The shock of it brought on this attack."

Spent by the effort required to speak, the widow closed her eyes, and relaxed. Thinking that she had gone to sleep, Penny left the bedside for a moment. A quick glance assured her that the kitchen window was open, and far more alarming, the screen had been neatly cut from its frame. An empty China teapot stood on the kitchen table.

"It must be true!" Penny thought with a sinking heart. "The pearls have been stolen, and the shock of it nearly killed Mrs. Marborough! But who could have known that she had the necklace here in the house?"

Louise and Rhoda were beyond suspicion, and for a moment she could think of no others who had knowledge of the pearls. Then, with a start, it came to her that the story had been told the previous night at the Breens.

"Ted knew about it and he was interested!" she thought. "But I can't believe he would do such a contemptible thing—even if he did once steal a chicken."

Penny's unhappy reflections were broken by the arrival of Rhoda with Doctor Hamilton. For the next half hour the girls were kept more than busy carrying out his instructions.

"Mrs. Marborough, in a way you have been very fortunate," the doctor said as he finally prepared to leave the house. "Your attack has been a light one and with proper care you should be on your feet again within a week or two. I'll arrange to have you taken to the hospital at once."

The widow tried to raise up in bed. "I won't go!" she announced. "Hospitals cost money—more than I have to spend."

"It won't cost you anything, Mrs. Marborough. I'll arrange everything."

"I refuse to be a charity patient," the widow declared defiantly. "I'll die first! Go away and take your pills with you!"

"Then if you refuse hospital care, I must arrange for a nurse."

"I can't afford that either," the old lady snapped.

"Just go away and I'll get along by myself. I'm feeling better. If I could only have a cup of tea—"

"I'll make it for you," Rhoda offered eagerly.

Penny signaled to the doctor, indicating that she wished him to follow her into another room. Once beyond the hearing of the old lady, she outlined a plan.

"Mrs. Marborough likes Rhoda very much," she said to the doctor. "I think she might be perfectly satisfied to be looked after by her."

"The girl seems sensible and efficient," Doctor Hamilton replied. "But would she be willing to stay?"

"I think she might for she has no home of her own."

Relieved to have the problem solved so easily, the doctor declared that the plan could be tried for a few days at least.

"I'll drop in again late tonight," he promised, picking up his bag.

Consulted by Penny, Rhoda said at once that she would be happy indeed to remain with Mrs. Marborough as long as her services were required. The widow too seemed pleased by the arrangement.

"It's very good of you," she murmured to Rhoda. "I can't pay you though. Not unless my pearls are recovered."

"Your pearls?" the girl echoed in astonishment.

Penny drew her friend aside, explaining what had occurred. Rhoda was shocked to learn that the necklace had been stolen.

"How dreadful!" she gasped. "Who could have taken the pearls?"

Apparently it did not occur to her that her own brother Ted might be regarded with suspicion. Penny was much too kind to drop such a hint, and kept her thoughts strictly to herself.

However, later in the day, with Mrs. Marborough's permission, she made a full report of the theft to local police. An officer visited Rose Acres, but aside from establishing exactly how the house had been entered, obtained few useful clues. Questioned at considerable length, Penny disclosed that so far as she knew only Louise Sidell, the trailer camp family, Ted, Rhoda and herself had known that the pearls were in the mansion.

"We'll keep that Breen family under surveillance," the officer promised. "I'll let you know if anything develops."

Another problem immediately confronted Penny. An inspection of the cupboards of the Marborough home had revealed that there was barely enough food to last a day.

"Buy whatever you need," the widow instructed. "You'll find money in the top bureau drawer."

By diligent search, the girls found four dollars and twenty-four cents which they felt certain was all the money the old lady possessed.

"Why, the medicines Doctor Hamilton ordered will take almost this much!" Penny said in dismay. "Something must be done."

Both girls respected Mrs. Marborough's desire for secrecy, but they knew it would not be possible to help her and, at the same time, prevent the townspeople from learning of her dire poverty. Deeply troubled, Penny placed the problem in Mrs. Weems' hands.

"Why, that poor woman!" the housekeeper explained. "To think that she is sick and hasn't the things that she needs. I'll send a basket of food at once. I am sure many people will be eager to help."

Mrs. Weems busied herself at the telephone, and within a few hours, all manner of useful gifts began to arrive at Rose Acres. Neighbors came to help Rhoda with the housework and to care for the widow.

As was inevitable, the entire story of Mrs. Marborough's poverty, including the loss of the pearl necklace, circulated throughout Riverview. Since there no longer was any excuse for secrecy, Penny disclosed to members of the Pilgrimage Committee what had become of the old lady's furniture and why she had refused to open her house during Festival Week. To her delight, a fund immediately was raised for the purpose of re-purchasing the valuable antiques. Mr. Butterworth, pleased to cooperate, agreed to sell the furniture for exactly the price he had paid.

The days drifted slowly along. Under Rhoda's faithful care, Mrs. Marborough soon was able to sit up in a wheel chair. Much subdued since the heart attack, she had little to say even when a moving van ar-

rived with her household furnishings. But one afternoon while Penny was inserting new candles in the glass candelabrum she so much admired, the old lady watched her from her chair by the window.

"You and Rhoda have fixed the house up so nicely," she said. "You've been very kind to me, and so have all the folks in Riverview."

"You have a great many friends, Mrs. Marborough," Penny replied, smiling. "You never gave them a chance to show it before."

"Perhaps I have been unfriendly," the widow acknowledged. "I didn't mean to be. Now that I'd like to show my appreciation, there's no way to do it. If only the police would get busy and find the rascal who stole my necklace—"

Penny did not reply immediately, for she could think of nothing encouraging to say. She and Rhoda both believed that the thief who had taken the pearls never would be apprehended.

"Mrs. Marborough," she said at length, "there is a way you could show the people of Riverview how you feel—but I'm sure you wouldn't care to do it."

"By opening my home for the Pilgrimage?" the widow asked, smiling.

"That's what I had in mind, but of course—"

"When is the Festival?" Mrs. Marborough broke in. "I've lost track of time since I've been sick."

"It starts day after tomorrow." Penny drew a deep

sigh. "I'm afraid the Festival may be a failure, for not half enough tickets have been sold."

"Would it help to include this house in the Pilgrimage?"

"It would save the Festival!" cried Penny. "You're not well enough to go through with it, though!"

"Fiddlesticks!" Mrs. Marborough snapped, her spirits reviving. "I'd like nothing better than a big party. What pleasure is it sitting in a wheel chair staring at a cracked wall? Now you go ahead and plan it just the way you like."

With time so short, Penny flew into action. She contacted members of the Festival Committee and immediately a new publicity campaign was launched. It was announced that Rose Acres would be included in the Pilgrimage and that a grand costume ball at the mansion would be open to the public.

"The affair is certain to be a success," Penny told her father enthusiastically. "I wish though that the Indian Show wasn't playing Riverview at the same time. By the way, have you made any further progress in proving that Jay Franklin's record stones are fakes?"

"Not very much," Mr. Parker ruefully admitted. "A report came back on that tool you picked up at Truman Crocker's shack."

"What was the verdict, Dad?"

"Professor Anjus, the expert who examined the

chisel, says he believes the stones could have been marked with it."

"Then Truman Crocker may be the guilty person!"

"It's not at all certain. In all events, I still hold to my original theory that the hoax was planned by Bill McJavins of the Indian Show."

"I certainly hope Mr. Franklin fails in trying to sell the stones to the museum."

"So do I," agreed the editor. "Unfortunately, unless I dig up evidence very quickly, the transaction will take place."

Penny did not give a great deal of thought to the affair of the record stones for Mrs. Marborough's illness had centered her interest at Rose Acres. In truth, she was far more concerned about the missing pearls. The police had made no progress in tracing the necklace and held scant hope the thief would be captured.

As for Ted Wiegand, Penny was unable to make up her mind whether or not he was the guilty person. Although he still worked for Judge Harlan, she seldom saw him. Occasionally, reports of his progress were given to her by Rhoda.

"Ted isn't provoked at me any more," she assured Penny. "He's beginning to think as I do that Mr. Coaten has been up to something crooked. I know for a fact that he gave Mrs. Breen money to force me out of the family."

"Are those two men still in town?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

Rhoda nodded. "They've been here to see me twice. Mrs. Marborough sent them away the last time. She dislikes them both because they once came here to ask if they could rent rooms."

"That must have been the night I overheard them talking at the wishing well," Penny returned.

She remained silent a moment, thinking. Suddenly, she glanced up, her eyes dancing. "Rhoda, I have an idea!"

"What is it, Penny?"

"It might not work, but if it should, we'd learn why Mr. Coaten is so eager to adopt you and Ted."

"Tell me what you have in mind."

"It's like this, Rhoda! If we could induce Mr. Coaten and his friend to come to Rose Acres on the night of the costume ball, I know how they might be made to talk!"

"Strong arm methods?" Rhoda asked, slightly amused.

"Indeed not! The old wishing well will turn the trick."

"You certainly have me puzzled, Penny."

"Getting those men here will be the most difficult," Penny went on, thinking aloud. "But I can sell them a ticket to the ball. Failing that, I'll give them one free."

"There's still no guarantee they would come."

"I know how we can make sure of it! Rhoda, you can write Mr. Coaten a note, asking him to meet you

here at ten o'clock. The ball will be in full sway by that time. If you hint you've decided to sign the adoption papers, he's certain to come."

"And then how will I get out of it?"

"Leave that part to me," Penny chuckled. "We'll get Mr. Coaten here, and you're to talk with him beside the wishing well."

"Why in that particular place?"

"I can't tell you now," Penny said, smiling mysteriously. "Just accept my word for it that it's of utmost importance. As soon as you get the men at the wishing well, make an excuse and run into the house, leaving them together."

"And then what?" Rhoda asked, completely bewildered.

"From that point the old well and I will take over!" Penny laughed. "I can't tell you another thing. But if my scheme works—and I think it will—Mr. Coaten's little game will be exposed in a most dramatic way!"

CHAPTER

23

GRAND BALL

"EVERYTHING WILL be ruined—everything!" wailed Penny. She stood in the living room at Rose Acres, her face pressed almost against the window pane. "It's been raining for an hour straight! No one will come to the party."

"Oh, don't take it so hard," Rhoda said cheerfully. "You know over three hundred tickets were sold. Even if the rain does cut down the crowd we'll still have as many people as this house can accommodate."

Admiringly, her gaze wandered about the room which glowed brilliantly with the light of dozens of candles. Every chair was in place, flowers decorated the vases, and at the square, old-fashioned piano, sat Mrs. Marborough, in rustling black silk, playing a few tinkling chords.

"You mustn't tire yourself," Rhoda said to her. "Not until the guests come, at least."

"I never felt better in my life," Mrs. Marborough insisted. "Why, I'm as excited as a school girl! Is Judge Harlan really coming to the ball?"

"Everyone of consequence in Riverview will be here," Rhoda assured her. "Even two of Penny's special guests."

"That's what worries me," Penny confessed, beginning to pace the floor. "I have my trap all ready to spring, but if this horrid rain keeps up, how can you meet Mr. Coaten by the well?"

"Why can't I talk to him in the library?"

"Because it won't do," Penny said patiently. "The entire scheme will fail unless you carry out your part exactly as we planned it."

"The rain is letting up," Mrs. Marborough declared, carefully moving from the piano to her wheel chair. "Mark my words, it will all be over within fifteen minutes."

"Oh, I hope so!" Penny breathed. "I hope so!"

To her gratification, the rain did cease within a short while, and members of the Festival Committee and hired musicians began to arrive. For the occasion, Penny, Rhoda, and Louise, had rented colonial costumes with fancy powdered wigs. They hovered near the front door, ready to greet the first guests.

"It's going to be a wonderful party," Louise remarked happily.

Soon visitors began to arrive in groups. The orches-

tra struck up and the ballroom became thronged with dancers.

"Mrs. Marborough is having a marvelous time," Rhoda told Louise. "In fact, so is everyone except Penny. She's worried because Mr. Coaten hasn't come."

Two men alighted from a taxi and walked up the path to the house.

"Here they come now!" Penny whispered excitedly. "Quick, Rhoda. Keep out of sight until I give the word!"

Barely had the girl vanished than Mr. Coaten and his companion reached the reception line. Penny greeted them with unusual warmth.

"Is Rhoda Wiegand here?" Mr. Coaten asked curtly. "We came to see her, not to attend the party."

"She was around a moment ago," Penny answered. "Why don't you look for her in the garden—perhaps by the wishing well."

The instant the two men had gone, Penny quickly ran to find Rhoda.

"Now remember, don't talk to Mr. Coaten except at the wishing well," she issued final instructions. "Then when he asks you to sign the paper, make an excuse and leave."

"I won't forget," Rhoda nodded. "But I still don't understand what you're up to."

Anxiously Penny watched from the porch until she

saw that her friend actually was talking to the two men beside the wishing well. Then, running into the crowded ballroom, she signaled the musicians to stop the music. Clapping her hands for attention, she announced:

"Ladies and gentlemen—a little surprise! The Old Wishing Well speaks! Listen and you may hear the conversation of unwary guests who reveal their secrets beside it!"

Reaching for a box secreted in a clump of artificial palms, Penny turned a switch. The startled dancers heard a crackling sound, and then Rhoda's voice came in on the loudspeaker, clear and distinct.

"I've thought it over, Mr. Coaten," were her words. "Even though I can't understand why you wish to adopt Ted and me I'll agree to the guardianship."

"Ah, I knew you would come to your senses," Mr. Coaten answered. "Just sign this paper and we'll be able to go into court and settle everything."

There was a slight pause and then Rhoda said: "Will you excuse me a moment, Mr. Coaten? I want to run into the house, but I'll be back."

Those in the ballroom had gathered close to Penny, listening with interest to the conversation, but curious to learn its significance.

"Listen!" she commanded, as many persons began to comment.

The two men who stood alone at the wishing well

were talking again, and Penny did not intend to miss a single word.

"Now what possessed Rhoda?" she heard Mr. Coaten mutter. "Is she going to back out again?"

"No, we have her nailed this time," the other answered. "That land is as good as ours! As soon as the adoption is legal, we'll put in our claim. The Texano Oil Company will pay handsomely. What those youngsters don't know won't hurt them."

The words, blaring out into the ballroom, were exactly what Penny wished to hear. Believing themselves to be alone, the two men were making damaging admissions. However, although it was evident that they meant to profit at Rhoda's expense, she could not understand exactly what they meant to do.

Judge Harlan stepped forward to inspect the radio equipment. "What is this?" he inquired. "A special joke of yours, Penelope?"

"It's no joke," she assured him earnestly. "Mr. Coaten has been trying to force Rhoda and Ted to agree to an adoption. We were suspicious of him, and so we arranged this little affair."

"How is the sound brought into the house?"

"I had a microphone installed inside the wishing well," Penny revealed. "The wires run through an underground tunnel."

"Very clever, very clever indeed," murmured the judge. "And the meaning of the conversation?"

"I don't know," Penny confessed. "Mr. Coaten is trying to cheat Rhoda and Ted, but how I can't guess. They own no property."

"Mr. Coaten spoke of the Texano Oil Company," the judge said thoughtfully. "That gives me a faint inkling—"

He did not finish, for at that instant Rhoda came hurriedly into the room. Penny motioned for her to join the group by the loudspeaker.

"Rhoda," said the judge, turning to her, "did your father own land in Texas?"

"Never," she replied promptly. "The only person in our family who owned property was grandfather. He had a large farm but sold it long before his death."

"Do you know the location of the property?" inquired the judge.

"I believe it was near the town of Elkland."

"Elkland! Then perhaps we have the explanation. Less than a month ago oil was discovered in that locality!"

"But the Wiegand land was sold years ago," Penny murmured.

"Much litigation has resulted from the fact that in the past many Texas properties were sold with oil rights reserved," explained the judge. "Now, this is only a guess. However, if Rhoda's grandfather kept such oil rights—as he may well have done—his heirs would have indisputable claim to any income derived from such source."

The loudspeaker had come to life again. As the two men at the wishing well resumed their conversation, everyone in the ballroom strained to hear the words.

"We'll get out of Riverview just as soon as the girl signs the paper," Mr. Coaten said to his companion. "We've wasted enough time in this one-horse town."

"Oh, I shouldn't say wasted," drawled Carl Addison. "We'll get the oil money. And that's not all. Take a look at this little trinket!"

There was a brief pause, followed by Mr. Coaten's angry exclamation: "The Marborough pearls! So you stole them!"

"Careful of your words," the other warned. "Your own record isn't so pure."

"I've never descended to stealing!"

"No?" Mr. Addison mocked. "The only difference is that you tie your packages up with legal red tape so that no one can pin anything on you."

"I use my head! Stealing the Marborough pearls was a stupid thing to do. You may go to prison for it."

"There's no risk," the other retorted. "The police didn't find a single clue."

The voices died away, indicating that the two men had moved some distance from the wishing well. Nevertheless, everyone in the ballroom had heard enough to realize that Mrs. Marborough's priceless pearls were in the possession of Mr. Coaten's companion, Carl Addison.

"I understand it all now!" Penny exclaimed. "Mr.

Coaten and his friend must have been standing outside the window of the trailer that night when Rhoda told the Breen family about finding the pearls! They probably heard the conversation."

"I want those two men arrested!" Mrs. Marborough announced in a shrill voice, propelling her wheel chair toward the door. "Why doesn't someone do something?"

Spurred to action, Judge Harlan instructed several men from the group to guard the estate exits. Accompanied by Penny, Rhoda, Louise, in fact, nearly every person who had attended the party, he strode into the yard to confront the two conspirators. Taken completely by surprise, Mr. Coaten and his friend did not immediately understand the meaning of the encircling delegation.

"Your little game is up," said Penny, thoroughly savoring the moment. "We know now that your real reason for wanting to adopt Rhoda and Ted was to gain control of valuable oil lands!"

"And you stole my pearl necklace!" accused Mrs. Marborough. "I want it returned!" Thoroughly incensed, she wheeled her chair directly into Carl Addison, seizing him by the coat.

"Madam, I know nothing about your pearls," the man blustered, shaking loose from her grasp. "We came to this party only because we were given free tickets."

"Let's get out of here," Mr. Coaten said gruffly, starting away.

"It's no use," Penny interposed, blocking the path. "We have learned everything. You see, a microphone was installed at the wishing well and it carried your entire conversation into the ballroom for everyone to hear."

Mr. Coaten and his companion, gazing at the unfriendly faces encircling them, realized that they could not hope to explain the situation away.

In a sudden break for freedom, Carl Addison ran to the hedge and attempted to leap over it. One of the guards at a nearby exit seized the man and brought him back.

"Search his pockets!" Mrs. Marborough cried.

Judge Harlan did as the widow demanded, but the missing pearls were not found on either of the men.

"There, you see!" Mr. Coaten declared triumphantly. "You have falsely accused my friend."

Penny suspected that Mr. Addison had disposed of the jewel case somewhere near the hedge. Crossing to it, she groped about on the ground. After a brief search her hand encountered a tiny box which she knew must contain the stolen necklace. Returning with it, she displayed the pearls and presented them to Mrs. Marborough.

"Do we need additional evidence to hold these men?" she asked Judge Harlan anxiously.

"You have produced more than enough," he replied. Turning to the two culprits, he said sternly: "I place you both under arrest! Stand where you are until the police arrive, and remember, anything you say may be used against you."

CHAPTER

24

RIVER RISING

THE EXPOSURE of Mr. Coaten and Carl Addison had been even more dramatic than Penny had dared hope it might be. She felt very grateful to Judge Harlan for the vital information he had provided regarding oil lands, and especially for the "break" of luck which had made it possible to regain Mrs. Marborough's necklace.

"How glad I am that I never told Rhoda I suspected Ted of the theft," she thought. "I was very unjust."

After the two Texas men had been removed to jail by Riverview police, the party went on with more gaiety than before. Penny, the center of attention, was forced to tell over and over how a high-school boy friend had assisted her in installing the microphone-loudspeaker arrangement in the old wishing well.

"I wasn't at all certain it would work," she modestly declared. "I did hope that under the proper conditions, those two men would talk, and they did!"

"You are a very clever young lady," praised Judge Harlan, patting her arm. "This will make a nice story for your father's paper too."

Mrs. Marborough did not try to express in words her appreciation for the recovery of the heirloom pearls. However, throughout the evening, her worshipful gaze followed Penny wherever she went. Not until refreshments were being served did she have an opportunity to say:

"Penelope, you have brought me more happiness than I deserve—you and Rhoda together. Now that I have the pearls again, I'll be able to carry out a few of my plans."

"You'll remain in Riverview?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Yes, I shall, and I've been wondering—do you suppose Rhoda and Ted would be willing to live with me? I'm getting old. While I'll have money enough I'll need someone."

"Why not talk to Rhoda about it?"

"I think I shall," Mrs. Marborough nodded. "I'll do it tonight."

Penny was pleased a few minutes later when Rhoda relayed the widow's request to her.

"Will you agree to it?" she asked the girl, her eyes twinkling.

"Will I?" Rhoda laughed. "I love Rose Acres, and Ted and I will be together again! Mrs. Breen was kind to us, but she has her own family. Mrs. Marborough needs someone to care for her."

"I think the arrangement will be an ideal one," Penny declared. "Oh, yes, I meant to tell you. Judge Harlan has promised to look after your legal interests. With him working on the case those oil rights are the same as yours right now!"

As the night wore on, additional guests arrived at Rose Acres, crowding the spacious rooms. Nevertheless, shortly before midnight, Penny was surprised to see her father's car drive up to the door, for she had not expected him to attend the party. Mr. Parker was accompanied by a reporter, Jerry Livingston.

"What brings you two news hawks here?" Penny asked, running outside to greet the newcomers. "You must have heard about Mr. Coaten and the pearl necklace!"

"Yes, but that's not why we came," Mr. Parker tersely replied. "There's been a break in the dam above Cedarville and the river is rising fast!"

"Rose Acres isn't in danger?" gasped Penny.

"The water shouldn't come this high, but the flats will be inundated within a few minutes. Everyone is being warned to get out fast!"

"We've not been able to telephone Truman Crocker," Jerry added. "His shack has no 'phone."

"Can we drive down there?" Mr. Parker asked anxiously.

Penny shook her head. "Not without going miles around. The quickest way is to take the trail at the rear of this property. Wait, I'll show you!"

Darting into the house for a coat, she led her father and Jerry to the hillside. Then, deciding to accompany them, she went on ahead down the steep incline.

"There's a light burning in the shack," Mr. Parker observed a few minutes later. "Crocker must be up."

Reaching the building, the editor thumped once on the door of the workshop and then pushed it open. Truman Crocker was busy at his bench. Startled by the unexpected intrusion of the three visitors, he backed a few steps away from them.

"You can't do nothin' to me," he mumbled. "All I did was what I was told to do."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mr. Parker cut him short. "We're here to warn you! The dam at Cedarville has let go, and the river is rising fast."

"The river—" the stonecutter faltered.

For a fleeting instant the man's gaze had roved toward a large object covered with a piece of canvas. As Crocker's words came back to Penny, she suddenly knew why he had been so startled to see her father. Impulsively, she darted across the room and jerked the canvas from the object it covered. Revealed for all to see was a large rounded rock, bearing a carving which had not been completed.

"A record stone!" she cried. "Truman Crocker, you are the one who planted those fakes! You've been hired by someone!"

"No, no," the man denied, cringing away.

Mr. Parker strode across the room, and one glance at the rock Penny had uncovered convinced him that his daughter's accusation was a sound one. Obviously, the stone had been treated with acid and chemicals to give it an appearance of great age. Several Indian figures remained uncompleted.

"Who hired you?" he demanded of Truman Crocker. "Tell the truth!"

"I ain't tellin' nothing," the stonecutter returned sullenly.

"Then you'll go to jail," Mr. Parker retorted. "You've been a party to a fraud. It was the publicity agent of the Indian Show who hired you. He probably gave you a hundred dollars for the job."

"Not that much," Crocker muttered. "An' you can't send me to jail because all I did was fix the stones and put 'em where he told me."

"You won't go to jail if you testify to the truth," Mr. Parker assured him. "All you'll have to do is tell what you know—"

"I ain't going to tell nothing," Crocker said sullenly.

Moving so quickly that both Jerry and Mr. Parker were caught off guard, he wheeled and ran out the open door.

"Get him!" the editor barked. "Unless he'll testify against Bill McJavins we may lose a big story!"

Penny waited anxiously at the shack while her father

and Jerry pursued the fleeing man. Ten minutes later they stumbled back, completely winded, to report their failure. The laborer had hidden somewhere among the bushes dotting the hillside, and they could not hope to find him.

"Without Crocker's story we have no more evidence than we ever had," Mr. Parker declared in disgust.

Penny tapped the big rock with the half-completed carving. "You have this stone, Dad. If you could photograph it in this unfinished state, wouldn't it tell its own story?"

"We have no camera here, and the river is rising fast. How long would it take you to get to town and back, Jerry?"

"I might make it in thirty minutes."

"Before that time, this shack will be under water."

Anxiously, Mr. Parker gazed at the dark, angry flood which swept so close to the door of the cabin. Inch by inch it was eating away a board walk which led to a pier and a boat tied to it.

"Dad!" Penny suddenly cried. "If only we could get this stone into the boat we could float it to Riverview!"

"Not a chance," Mr. Parker returned briefly. "Both would sink."

"We're completely out of luck," added Jerry. "At the rate the water is coming up, this shack will be awash in another fifteen minutes."

"Dad," Penny went on determinedly, "if we could make a heavy raft, couldn't the stone be floated? It might be towed behind the boat."

"A raft? There's nothing from which to make one."

"Yes, there is!" Penny pointed to several barrels, upended in a dark corner of the shop.

"It's an idea!" cried Jerry. "We have Crocker's tools! This story means a lot to you, Chief. Isn't it worth a try?"

"Maybe it is," Mr. Parker conceded, and then with sudden enthusiasm: "Let's get to work. By moving fast we may yet outwit Old Man River!"

CHAPTER

25

PRECIOUS CARGO

WORKING WITH feverish haste, Mr. Parker and Jerry constructed a raft of eight empty barrels, wiring them together into one solid unit. Penny aided the two men as best she could, holding tools and offering suggestions which were not especially appreciated.

"Run outside and see that the boat is all right," Mr. Parker instructed her. "We mustn't let it float away."

Obeying, Penny discovered that already the river was flowing in a shallow, muddy stream over the pier. The swift current tugged at the underpining, threatening to carry it away. Wading through the water, she reached the boat and drew it close to the shack where she retied it.

By the time she finished, her father and Jerry had completed the raft.

"How will you ever get the stone on it?" Penny

asked anxiously. "It must weigh several hundred pounds."

"Just watch," grinned Jerry.

During Penny's absence, he and Mr. Parker had constructed a small square platform of rough boards, equipped with four tiny rollers. Getting the stone on it, they were able to trundle it outside to the raft with a minimum of exertion.

"Now dump her on easy," Mr. Parker ordered Jerry. "If she sinks, our story sinks too."

Together they rolled the heavy stone from the platform to the raft which immediately began to settle beneath the great weight.

"It's going under!" Penny screamed.

As the three watched anxiously, the raft steadied and rode just beneath the surface of the water.

"She floats!" Jerry cried jubilantly. "Now unless we have an upset or strike an object in the river, we should make it to the Adams Street pier."

"We'll have a *Star* paper truck meet us there, and haul the rock to the newspaper plant," Mr. Parker added with satisfaction. "Let's shove off!"

Penny had untied the rowboat. However, as she prepared to step into it, her father pulled her back.

"This little trip isn't for you, Penny. We might upset."

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad," she argued. "You know very well I can swim circles around you. If the boat does go under, you'll be glad to have me along."

"Maybe you're right," the editor conceded. "Jump in."

Water was flowing over the floor of the Crocker shack as the boat and the cumbersome raft started downstream. Jerry, who had elected to steer, found himself hard pressed to keep the prow nosing into the waves. Mr. Parker pulled without much enthusiasm at an extra oar supplied him, content to allow the swift current to do most of the work.

"Isn't it fun?" Penny demanded, snuggling close to her father. "Just look at the beautiful stars!"

"Look at the river," Mr. Parker retorted. "Do you realize that if we should strike a floating object—if that big rock should shift—"

"And see the lovely moon," Penny went on dreamily. "I think it's laughing at the joke we're going to play on Jay Franklin in the morning."

"That old coot will get a shock when he reads the *Star*," Mr. Parker admitted, relaxing. "So will the publicity agent of the Indian Show. When I get through, the outfit won't dare put on a performance in Riverview."

"Do you suppose Franklin had any part in hiring Truman Crocker to fake those record stones?" Jerry asked, steering to avoid a floating box.

"Not in my opinion," the editor replied. "He merely thought he would profit by selling them to the museum at a fancy price. It was immaterial to him whether or not he sold fake stones or real."

"You'll certainly ruin his little business transaction," chuckled Penny. "What will be done about Truman Crocker?"

"We'll find him tomorrow and force him to tell the truth—that he was hired by Bill McJavins. With this stone as evidence, he can't deny his part in the hoax."

"Can't you just see that special edition of the *Star?*" Penny asked gaily. "A big splashy picture of this Pilgrim Rock we're towing, with a story telling how Truman Crocker faked the writing. Then, in the next column, a yarn about Mr. Addison's arrest, and the recovery of the Marborough pearls."

"It will be a real paper," Mr. Parker agreed heartily. "By the way, how were Mr. Coaten and Carl Addison trapped? Our reporter got the story from the police, but he was a bit vague on that point."

"I'm far too modest to tell you," Penny laughed. "If you're willing to pay me at regular space rates, I might be induced to write the story."

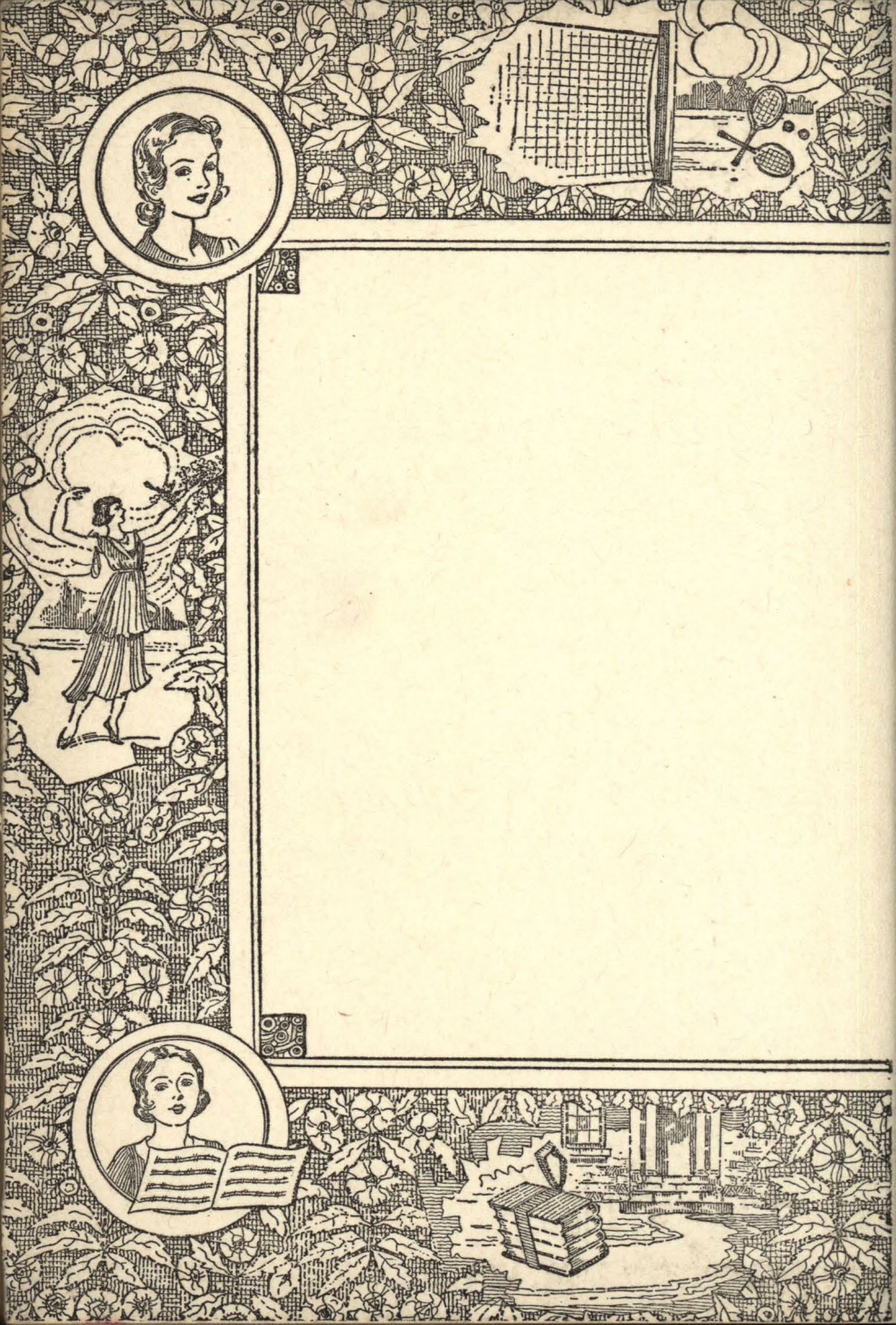
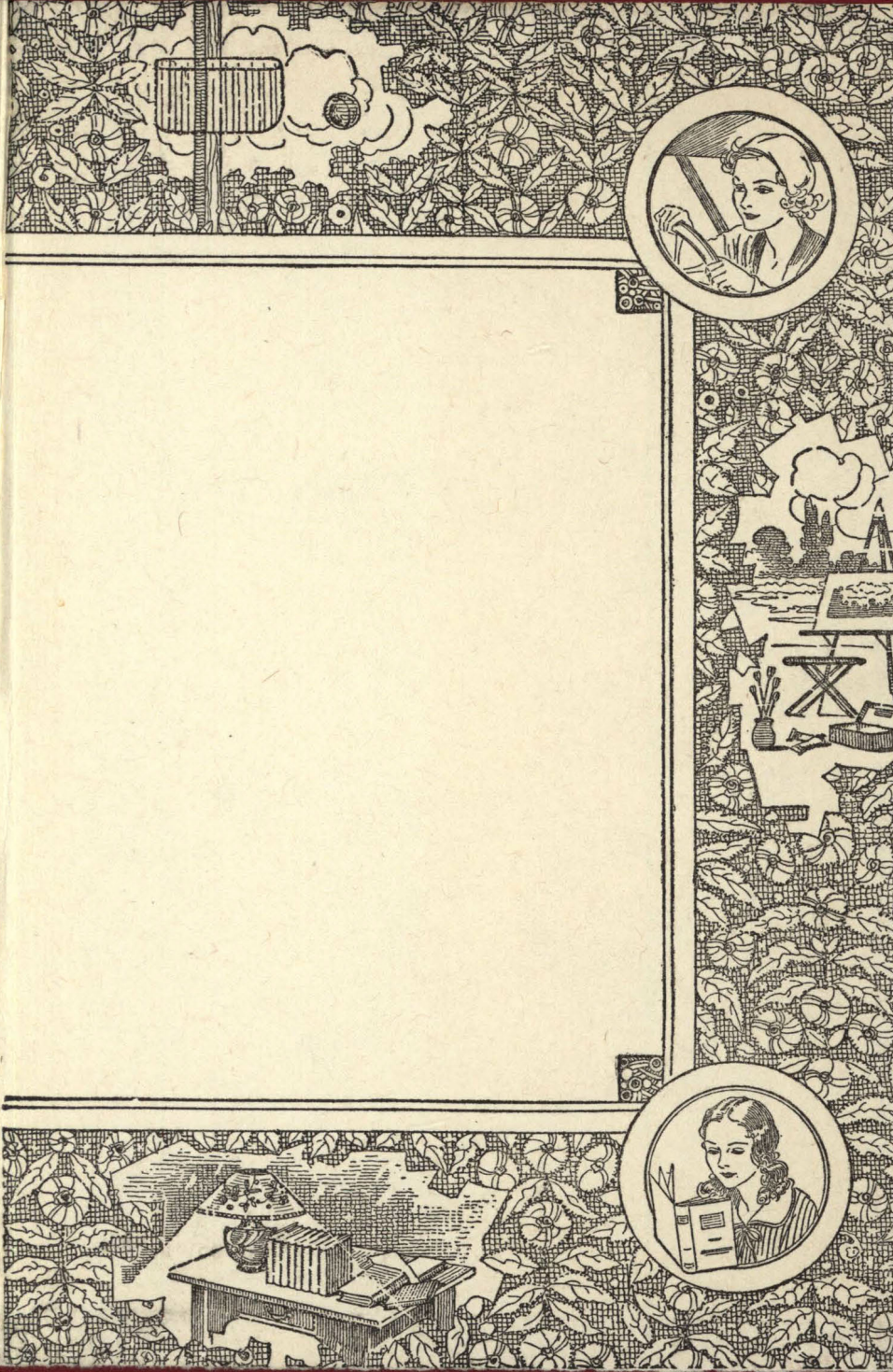
"Trust Penny to drive a hard bargain," grinned Jerry. "We might have guessed who was responsible, for she never fails to be on hand for the final round-up."

Penny smiled as she gazed down the dark, turbulent river. Close by she heard the deep-throated whistle of a tug boat. Along the bank, tall buildings began to appear, and far ahead, she could see the twinkling lights on the Adams Street pier.

"We've worked on some dandy stories together,"

she murmured, "but this one tops them all for a thrilling finish. Mrs. Marborough regained her pearls Rhoda won a home, the two men from Texas are behind bars, and the wishing well is equipped with a brand new microphone! You know, I'd like to make one more wish down its moist old throat!"

"What would you ask for this time?" Jerry asked banteringly. "A safe arrival in port?"

Penny shook her head. "We're almost at the pier now. I'd wish that Dad's hunk of granite would turn into a lump of pure gold. Then I'd truly feel as if I were the captain of a treasure ship sailing home with precious cargo."

"Oh, I wouldn't ask for a better cargo than we have right here," Mr. Parker responded heartily. "At this moment I would rather have our old rock than all the gold in the world!"